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## TWO FACED MURDER

by JEAN LESLIE

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## The WITCHES' POOL

by SUSAN WELLS

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# Two Complete DETECTIVE BOOKS

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## TWO FACED MURDER

By JEAN LESLIE

What was wrong? They were all lovely people in this college town, and Professor Peter Ponsonby and his luscious fiancée, Mara Mallory, were glad to be visiting them; even Candy Too, Peter's four-year-old niece, was having a good time. But the grim cancer of a secret worry was eating at their hosts, Ken and Allie Grayson. And pleasant Georgianna Fawcett. And debonair James York, the poet. And Peggy Ann Larsen, she of the war-smashed husband. And Mark Cready, the Restoration man. And Amos Schroeder, the despised police chief. For Clive Titus' wife, Jane, had disappeared and until she was found each had private reason for terror. They all turned anxious eyes on Peter Ponsonby, writer of detective stories and therefore skilled at solving human puzzles. Peter sighed and went out with Mara to find Jane. It wasn't hard. Poor Jane was forever done with running and hiding. Then Peter started grimly along an old and terrible trail, and the murderer it was who had to run and hide. Until Peter finally treed his vicious quarry. Then the killer whirled and struck—again—and again! *Copyright, 1946, by Doubleday & Co., Inc. Regular edition, \$2.00.*

## THE WITCHES' POOL

By SUSAN WELLS

The *Paquita* was really a dreamboat. Tony and Echo Ware's hearts had broken when the war forced them to sell the little trim, white yawl. Then the fighting stopped and lovely, wistful Echo came back first—to a bullet-hole in the bulkhead, a beautiful intruder writing strange messages in the dead of night, an elderly female corpse floating in the water and the carefully-laid-out skeleton of a cat. Threading all these things together was the mystery of who had written "The Witches' Pool," a psychological thriller—and obviously true! But the worst of all was the inexorable tightening of the coils of guilt about Echo herself. Had she not been heard threatening the drowned woman? Echo fled—fled from the diabolical cleverness of a twisted mind—fled to a place by a quiet pool. Yet poison and evil lay thick in the very air above its polluted waters . . . for she had come to the Witches' Pool itself. And brutal death lay waiting for her there, treading softly over the lush, wild flowers. . . . *In advance of publication in book form.*

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THE NEXT ISSUE OF TWO COMPLETE DETECTIVE BOOKS WILL BE ON  
SALE AT THE NEWSSTANDS ON MAY 1st, 1947

# *Two Faced* MURDER



By  
JEAN LESLIE



# TWO FACED MURDER

By JEAN LESLIE

PROFESSOR PETER PONSONBY rang the doorbell again and heard it echo in the empty house. He wiped perspiration from his head. "Maybe," he suggested charitably, "they ran out for limes. Or soda water."

"Sure, sure," Mara Mallory answered. "That's why the morning paper is still here and two quarts of milk curdling in the sun." She moved the bottles into the shade. "But speaking of limes and soda water gives me a dandy idea. Even this Sahara must have one water hole, and that's all I need. Would you care to join me in tossing off a tankard?"

Peter looked again at the locked door and sighed. "I might as well," he said bitterly. "*Friends!*" The word was venomous.

"Yoo-hoo! Professor!"

A woman was leaning over the gate, her smiling face framed by the bright blossoms of a Paul's Scarlet. "You *are* Dr. Ponsonby, aren't you?"

"I think so."

"A white woman," Mara muttered.

They went down the steps as the caller opened the front gate. She walked toward them briskly on low-heeled shoes which managed to be at once practical and attractive. The hand she offered Ponsonby was strong-fingered and big.

"I knew the Graysons were gone and I appointed myself a reception committee of one." Her face split open in a whole-hearted grin. She had a large mouth, but pretty; and her teeth were nice. "I'm Fawcett of Chemistry." She looked inquiringly at Mara.

"Miss Mallory," Peter supplied. "Miss Mallory is my fiancée." It always sounded silly and he blushed. It still seemed incredible that he and Mara should have arrived at this status after twelve years during which they had been, progressively, teacher and student, department head and secretary, coldly indifferent strangers, and two people very much in love.

"Would that be Georgianna Fawcett of Vitamin-E fame?" Mara smiled.

"Yes, but no one calls me Georgianna, and don't you dare start it! I'm Fawcett to most people and George to my friends." She looked into Mara's enchanting and intelligent face and smiled. "I'd like to be George to you," she added.

"Thanks, George. My name's Mara. The professor is yclept Peter, and I hate to have him called Pete."

"Then I'll call him Peter. Hello, Peter."

"Hello, George."

The three of them were suddenly friends. They stood on the flagstone path under the hot sun, smiling at one another in immediate and complete understanding.

"You look hot and dusty," Dr. Fawcett observed. "And after two hundred miles you have a right to. Come next door and I'll give you a beer." She led the way through the gate and down the sidewalk. "I'm alone now," she explained. "My husband—Wallace Fawcett of Biology—is teaching the summer session at the University of Colorado, and our young daughters are visiting in San Francisco."

THE HOUSE was a companion to the one they had just left; old and comfortably shabby, with a mansard roof to date it and fine old trees for shade. The wide porch was filled with rickety willow chairs and the inevitable squeaky swing.

"I'll be back in a minute with the beers," Dr. Fawcett assured them. "Stay out or come in, as you like, and there's a bath through there if you want it."

Mara carefully sank into a chair of questionable stability. It held together and she relaxed with a sigh.

Ponsonby let his eyes run over Mara from the top of her disheveled dark head to the beautiful ankles and high arched feet some sixty-nine inches farther down. A luscious wench, he told himself, designed by Nature to undermine morale.

"There!" Fawcett set a large tray on



a table that sagged under the weight. "I had sandwiches ready, too, in case you hadn't stopped for lunch. We're all terribly thrilled," she went on, "about your week-end visit. Alicia says you're getting married."

"That was what I thought when I phoned Ken." Peter smiled lopsidedly and took his glass of beer to the porch railing. "I had a lovely plan worked out, but Mara spiked it. Her brother-in-law came home from the wars sagging under the load of medals he had acquired, so Mara took over their loathsome child and packed them off on a second honeymoon."

"You're marrying a nice woman, Peter Ponsonby." George nodded approval.

"I think so. As a matter of fact," Peter grinned, "I'm marrying a nice family. Dave Allison is a hell of a swell guy, and I'm glad he and Candida are getting the trip. They've earned it. As Mara says, we've waited so long that another month won't matter. Much."

"Alicia will be disappointed," Dr. Fawcett observed. "But maybe," she added obliquely, "it's just as well it turned out this way."

Some evasiveness in Dr. Fawcett's manner prompted Peter to ask, "Where have the Graysons gone?"

George Fawcett folded strong, well-scrubbed hands in her lap and looked at Ponsonby appraisingly. "Our faculty ran into a spot of trouble today," she answered. "The Graysons and some of the others have gone hunting for a faculty wife who hasn't been seen since yesterday."

"Faculty wives are only human," Mara murmured.

"This faculty wife," George sighed, "is young and beautiful, and according to the gossips her love life is anything but dull."

"Well, then," Mara said brightly, "she probably went off with the object of her affections."

"A nice theory," George admitted, "except that I saw the o. of her a. carrying home the groceries this morning."

"There are lots of reasons for people disappearing," Peter said reasonably. "They get calls from dying relatives and leave notes which are never found; they take the dog for a walk and get hit by a car; they are bopped by falling bricks and wind up asking the desk sergeant if he

knows where they live. Lots of things happen."

"Of course," George agreed absently. "We're probably making a mountain out of a molehill."

SHE ATE her sandwich thoughtfully and then said, "But Jane hadn't any relative except her stepfather, and she hadn't a dog to walk, and an accident would be reported at once in a small community like this, and amnesia victims get picked up."

Peter lowered his feet to the floor and stared at George inquisitively. "What are you suggesting?" he asked politely.

"Nothing." She peered expectantly at a dirty sedan coming up the street, watched it pass, and sighed.

"You can't do that to Peter," Mara laughed. "Just the suggestion of mystery has him drooling at the mouth. You better tell him all about it, George."

"Nonsense," Peter said stiffly. "It's none of my business."

"It may be before you leave," George replied darkly. "After all, Peter, you figure out all sorts of situations in your books."

"Those are situations of my own making," he grinned. "Which is something else again. And they tend to be lurid. I wouldn't worry, George," he repeated. "Only a small percentage of so-called disappearances are sinister."

A long black sedan, polished to mirror brightness, slid to a stop at the curb. George Fawcett peeked through the big-ponia vines and smiled. "Good!" she whispered. "Maybe we'll hear something; this is the girl's stepfather. Hello, Jim!" she called. "Come and have a beer."

Paternity had rested lightly on the man who came up the walk. He certainly, Peter thought, didn't look like anyone whose daughter had disappeared mysteriously. He was six feet of sunburned brawn; his dark eyes were bright and untroubled, and his hair, graying at the temples, was as dense and unruly as a boy's.

"Hello, George." The man's voice was resonant and his accents markedly—if not authentically—Oxonian. "I didn't know you had guests."

"That's all right. Miss Mallory, Professor York. Professor Ponsonby, Professor York."

"Ah, Ponsonby of English, of course! Delighted to meet you!" Jim York wrung Peter's hand. "And Miss Mallory." He bent to Mara's chair and dropped his voice to an intimate murmur. "Ken told us we had a treat in store," he said archly.

"Thank you." Mara's voice was cool. "I believe you're in English too?"

"Dr. York is chairman of the department," George supplied. "Here's your beer, Jim. Sit down."

He accepted the glass and sat next to Mara. "Do you teach, Miss Mallory?"

She shook her head and smiled. "No, I'm only a departmental secretary."

"And you and the professor are here to get married, I understand." He made it sound like a poor bargain for Mara.

"That was our plan originally," she corrected. "But we're not going to be married." York brightened. "Not yet." York dimmed.

George Fawcett seized the opportunity to ask, "Is there any news from Jane?"

Jim York looked amused. "Not a word. Are the Graysons still out hunting?"

"Yes, and Helen with them."

"Their search is all very silly," York smiled. "The whole thing will turn out to be another of Jane's pranks, designed to frighten us and attract attention." He turned laughing dark eyes from Mara to Peter. "I suppose George has told you about our tempest in a teapot?"

"She said your stepdaughter hadn't been since yesterday," Peter answered. "What do you think has happened?"

"Nothing," York replied promptly. "Jane gets bored with our little town, and I don't blame her. I expect she obeyed one of her impulses and dashed off to San Francisco or Los Angeles in search of some excitement."

JANE wasn't the only one in the family who liked her fun: York's eyes flicked to where Mara was stretching her elegant legs and traveled along them slowly. Peter didn't like slacks but he could see their advantages.

Mara rose and smoothed her jersey dress over her hips, and York didn't miss that either. "Perhaps," Mara said to George, "I should look at my niece. She's asleep in the car, and it gets very warm when we're parked."

"I'll come too," Peter said promptly.

"I wish you could do something about your delectable anatomy," he grumbled when they were on the sidewalk. "It's a lovely asset, but I sometimes think you make it unnecessarily provocative. York is swooning over you."

"Let him swoon," Mara said callously. "Do you know who he is?"

"Sure. Stepfather of the girl who—"

"Don't be stupid! He's James York, the poet."

"Ah yes!" Ponsonby breathed, with bogus reverence. "The poet of homespun philosophy. You're suffering from professional jealousy," he ribbed. "After all, he's been included in several anthologies—which is more than you can say."

They came abreast of Peter's rakish convertible and looked in at the open window.

"Hi!" Under a tangled thicket of red curls, round blue eyes stared unwinkingly from a flushed and dirty face. "Are we going home now? I want Mama."

Peter pulled the plump little body through the window and stuck his nose into Candy Too's hair. Candy Too always smelled good.

"You don't want Mama," he said reproachfully. "Come up on the porch and meet a gentleman whom your aunt admires extravagantly."

Candy twined damp arms around his neck and pressed sticky lips to his. "Candy Too wants a drink," she confided.

Peter nodded approval. "Stout idea," he said seriously. "But you'll have to make do with beer; it's all they're serving."

Mara smiled. "You two look as though you belonged to each other. You have the same hair and you both stare disconcertingly."

As they neared the Fawcett house she lowered her voice discreetly. "I wonder what cooks."

Jim York was bent over Dr. Fawcett's chair, talking earnestly. Peter cleared his throat and stamped up the steps. "This is Candida Allison," he explained. "Better known as Candy Too. Someday—before she goes to college, I hope—she will be my niece. Candy, this is Dr. Fawcett and this is Dr. York."

Candy looked into the upturned smiling faces and said, "Hiya," indifferently.

PETER stood her on her feet and smoothed the wrinkled pinafore. "Scram," he ordered, "and mind your manners."

"We were just talking shop," York said quickly. "I expect that's true of faculty members anywhere, isn't it?"

"Probably." Peter did not add that he never saw his own faculty except in line of duty. Avoiding Mara's eyes, he added, "Aren't you the York who is included in the omnibus of American poets?"

York's look was fatuous. "I'm in several anthologies," he corrected, enunciating each syllable with exquisite precision. "And I have a nice little volume of my own. I'd like to give you a copy—autographed—if you haven't one."

"Please don't," Mara said.

Peter did a quick double-take, but she was talking to Candy Too.

"No, no, darling!"

With the unerring instinct of a homing pigeon Candy had found the empty beer bottles and was trying them for heeltaps.

"I'm sorry I interrupted you," Mara said sweetly, taking her niece onto her lap. "What were you saying?"

"Just that I'd like to give you my humble little book of verse, if you would be kind enough to accept it."

"Thank you. Peter would love it."

An old car rolled along the street and honked, tum, tum-tum-tum, tum, tum.

"There they are," Dr. Fawcett said gratefully. "It's the Graysons. I do hope they have news of Jane."

"Let's go over and find out," York said.

The two parties met in the Graysons' driveway. The diminutive woman with the harassed face and the wispy, straw-colored hair Peter knew would be Ken's older sister, although he had never met her. She was followed more leisurely by her brother and an attractive blonde of indeterminate age.

"Not a thing!" Alicia Grayson gasped. "All day and not a single clue!"

"Hello, darling." Mara leaned down to Ken Grayson and kissed him resoundingly. "It's lovely to see you again."

The young English professor laughed self-consciously.

Alicia tipped back her head for a better view and her face crinkled up in a warm smile. "She's everything you said," she

agreed. "I'm sorry we weren't here to welcome you, Miss Mallory."

"I'm Ponsonby," Peter said meekly. "No one ever thinks to introduce me. And this moppet is Mara's niece."

"Hi, Pete!" Kenneth Grayson jumped at the older professor like an anxious fox terrier. "It's great having you here! Let me introduce my sister Alicia, and Miss Herrick. Miss Mallory, Miss Herrick and my sister."

The blonde woman was good-looking, Peter noticed, but it was the sort of attractiveness that came from careful grooming and a faithful adherence to prevailing fashion. She murmured something polite and hooked her arm through York's.

"We'll let you make amends to your guests," she told Alicia. "Perhaps we'll see you later this evening."

York disengaged himself to wring Peter's hand again, and then the two of them, angled off across the street toward a neat gray cottage set in a pretty garden.

"More faculty?" Peter asked.

"She used to be," Alicia answered.

Disappointment and anxiety lined George Fawcett's pleasant face. "I'm sorry you didn't learn anything about Jane," she sighed. "I'm going home and let you people talk." Her fine hazel eyes met Peter's, and the glance was meaningful. "Good luck," she nodded.

## II

CANDY HITCHED UP A PAIR OF grimy cotton panties and stared at Alicia Grayson. "Do you have any chill-run?" she asked without preamble.

"No. No, I don't," Alicia smiled.

"Why?"

"Because I'm not married." Alicia's face blushed dully.

"Why aren't you—"

"I wonder if Candy could have a glass of milk?" Mara intervened. "She usually does in the middle of the afternoon."

"And graham cracker," Candy added.

"If you'll excuse me, we'll see what we can find." Alicia took the grubby hand in hers and went into the house.

"Come up on the porch," Ken urged. "Sit down and let's have a good visit. How's everything on the home campus? Getting along all right without me?" He

pressed them into chairs and passed cigarettes. "Anything new? How's Prexy?"

"Same old stuffed shirt," Peter answered. "How is the summer session here?"

"Going fine! Just fine!" Ken said loudly. "Nice bunch of people on the faculty, and it's great being back at my alma mater. For a few weeks, anyway." He took two drags from his cigarette and snapped it onto the lawn. "How about a beer?"

"Beer would be fine."

"Won't take me but a minute." Grayson narrowly avoided colliding with the porch swing, smiled uncertainly, and went into the house.

One of Mara's beautiful dark brows crawled up questioningly. "Is our little friend on the nervous side?"

"He's nervous, all right." Peter folded his arms. "He acts positively coky."

"Just between ourselves, what do you make of the disappearing faculty wife?"

"It looks bad," Peter said happily. "It's all well enough to say that disappearances are not necessarily sinister, but when the disapparee—am I coining a word?—is young and beautiful and discontented and mixed up in an extra-marital affair, it looks bad. But bad."

"Maybe," Mara said hopefully, "her lover drowned her in the bay last night."

"And came back to do the marketing this morning?" Peter grinned at her ghoul-ish interest. "It's possible, I suppose."

"I hope she shows up before we leave," Mara sighed. "I hate unsolved riddles."

"Maybe she can't show up."

Mara's eyes sparkled avidly. "You mean she may be—"

For answer Peter ran his hand lightly down over her face, as aware as a blind man of every curve and plane.

"Bright little pan," he said softly. "Incredible little nose. I'd like to eat you."

She nipped his thumb smartly with her teeth. "Don't try to change the subject," she hissed. "Do you really think—"

"Here's your beer," Ken said, and set the tray down so hard the bottles rocked. "Oops, sorry!" He poured the beer too fast. "I'm certainly glad everything is going all right at home. Pretty quiet there, I imagine." It sounded wistful.

"Very." The corners of Peter's mouth twitched. "Can you say as much for this campus?"

"Oh, sure! This is a very provincial little place. Not much excitement around here."

"Until today," Mara observed.

"Oh, that." Ken laughed hollowly. "I suppose George told you about Jane's running off."

"She mentioned it."

"Just a joke, probably." The dialogue was hackneyed. "Jane's gone in search of a little excitement. I can't blame her."

Peter drew noisily on his pipe. Mara studied her nails critically. The conversation limped away and died.

**K**EN'S nervousness, coupled with his reluctance to talk, piqued Ponsonby's curiosity. He pursed his lips in a noiseless whistle and began to swing gently, listening to the rusty friction of chain against hook. *Squeak, squeak, squeak.* It was not a soothing sound. Peter grinned to himself and continued to swing.

In a minute Ken got up and walked the length of the porch, shoulders hunched high and his hands driven into his pockets. Following his line of vision, the two in the swing could see York's handsomely attired back above the privet hedge of the garden across the street.

Ken stalked back to his chair and sat down. "I'm glad you met Jim York," he said abruptly. "I meant to get you together this week end. Jim's a pretty wonderful person." He cleared his throat self-consciously. "Everyone, I guess," he said shyly, "has some particular teacher who serves as a model, someone who is responsible for one's philosophy and that sort of thing. Jim was mine," he ended lamely.

Peter hated ideals. He hated the foggy mumbo jumbo about heroes and models of conduct. He was embarrassed for Ken's immaturity. "Who is Miss Herrick?" he asked, to change the subject.

"A close friend of Allie's," Ken answered. "Allie is the librarian for the Philosophy Department, you know, and Helen taught English in the college until a year or two ago. They've gone around together since they were in high school."

"She seems to be a friend of York's too." Peter nodded.

"Well, yes," Ken said hesitantly. "Yes, she's a friend of his."

"Miss Herrick?" Mara asked. "No doctorate?"

"No. No doctorate."

Peter swung gently. *Squeak, squeak.*

"What was George's version of Jane's disappearance?" Ken asked finally.

Peter was equally casual. "Nothing in particular," he answered. "Just said you were out looking for some faculty wife who hadn't been seen since yesterday." He frowned. "This town is too small for one to disappear conveniently."

Ken gave a restless shrug. "Oh, it's just one of Jane's nutty notions. She'll be back the first of the week."

"Probably. I gathered that her friends all lived away from here."

"They do." Ken jumped at the easy answer. "The only people she knows here are her stepfather's friends. She isn't home much of the time."

Peter sighed and knocked his pipe against his heel before he turned to frown at Mara. "Did you lose something?" he asked coldly. "Or are you playing games?"

She had moved the swing cushions twice and was, at the moment, running an exploratory hand along the space behind Peter.

"My lipstick," she complained. "It must have fallen out in the car or on Dr. Fawcett's porch. Be a dear and look for it, will you, Peter?"

Their eyes met in the complete understanding of long practice.

Peter sighed resignedly and rose. "I wish you could hang onto things," he grumbled. "I'll be right back, Ken."

He spent an idle minute staring into the interior of his car and saw, in the reflector, that Mara had coaxed Ken over to the swing. Peter grinned and walked into George Fawcett's yard.

"I hoped one of you would come back," she said softly from behind the bignonias. "Didn't they learn *anything*?"

"Apparently not."

George sat down suddenly as though the strength had gone out of her legs. "Twenty-four hours," she said thoughtfully. "You would think someone would have heard from Jane."

"You'd think so."

"How does Ken take it?" George asked. "Is he worried?"

"Very, but he won't talk about it," Peter

shrugged. "He echoes Dr. York: it's all a practical joke; Jane is looking for excitement. Same words, same music. What goes on here, George?"

George Fawcett stared abstractedly at her shoes; Peter smoked and waited.

"Ken is scared," George said finally. "Allie is scared. I'm scared." She smiled lamely. "In spite of anything Jim York may say, the three of us don't think Jane's disappearance is a joke. We think it has all sorts of terrible possibilities and we don't know what to do."

"Go to the police," Peter advised.

"We can't."

"Why not?"

"I'll have to answer that in a very indirect way," George apologized. "It's all mixed up with a small-town idol and a legend and an old scandal."

"The plot thickens," Peter grinned.

"IT'S a funny thing about hero worship," George said thoughtfully. "People hate to admit that gods have feet of clay. Some gods anyway. The idol of this town is Jim York."

"I can understand that," Peter nodded.

"Yes. He's not only handsome and charming and a poet of importance, but he is also a marvelous teacher and a fine man. It was inevitable, I suppose, that his students and faculty should build him into a sort of legendary figure. That isn't natural, Peter, and it isn't good."

"No."

"Because then people expect perfection, and no man can deliver that all of the time. Spring before last," she sighed, "the town had a good look at Jim's feet."

"Clay?"

"Definitely. The result was that it split the York admirers into two factions. Part of them can now be called the *anti*-Yorks," she smiled. "The rest are still *pro*-York. The *antis* took their disillusionment hard, and the *pros* are more idolatrous than ever. Jim has become a bone of contention."

"The *pros*, I take it, won't see York's clay feet and the *antis* can't see anything else."

"That's about the size of it. As a result everything that happens in the York family is exaggeratedly important."

"Like Jane's disappearance."

"Yes," George agreed soberly. "Like

Jane's disappearance. To go to the police is to give it—and indirectly, Jim—publicity. It's far better, Peter, if we can find her and bring her home ourselves. The *antis* will read all sorts of meanings into whatever she has done, and the *pros* are determined to get her back before the *antis* know she's gone."

Peter balanced himself on the porch railing and scowled at George Fawcett. "You're luring me, damn it," he complained. "You're dangling all of the elements of a first-class mystery under my nose and daring me to solve it."

"I'm trying to," she retorted. "We need expert advice."

"Oh, brother!"

"Well, you solve all sorts of situations in your books," George repeated. "Surely you know what to do about a simple little thing like this."

"Who knows that Jane's disappearance is 'simple'?"

"We don't know, of course. We can only hope."

"Let's toy with the idea for a while," Peter compromised, "and see what we make of it. First, there's Jane."

"She is the wife of Dr. Clive Titus, the biochemist. Jane is twenty-seven and Clive is forty-five. They have no children. Jane has a good income and she lives here about three months out of the year, as a rule. Since she fell in love with Mark she's stayed home more."

"Mark would be the lover in our little piece?" Peter asked.

"So they say." George's handsome face clouded. "I loathe gossip and I seldom repeat it, but it is generally understood, I believe, that Jane Titus and Mark Cready have been seeing a great deal of each other."

Peter's feet came down with a thump. "Mark Cready?" he asked eagerly. "The Restoration man?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"No, but I admire his work tremendously. I thought he was still at Stanford."

"Goodness, no! Mark left Stanford three years ago. He taught at Virginia after that, and he's been here three semesters."

Peter considered the tip of his cigarette thoughtfully. Men of Cready's ability and training were not usually drifters unless . . .

"Cready's married, isn't he?"

"Yes, to a perfectly marvelous woman. You'll like Elizabeth."

"Then why the affair with Jane?"

"That," George said shrewdly, "would be Jane's doing. Jane is very persistent."

"All right." Peter nodded agreeably. "I've got Jane pegged now. A silhouette of her, anyway. Let's go back to the college. Who are the *pro*-Yorks?"

"Oh, people," George said generally. "All of the English Department, of course, and ever so many others who think he's wonderful. His closest friends have always been the Graysons, ourselves, Helen Herrick, and—more recently—the Creadys."

"And all of these people know about her disappearance?"

"I'm not sure about the Creadys," George admitted. "You see, Clive called Jim to see if he knew where Jane was. Jim didn't so he called Alicia. Alicia came over to ask me, and we went together to see Helen." She laughed faintly. "I can't believe that was only this morning! I had a seminar, but Ken got someone to take his classes, and he and Allie and Helen went out to the Tituses' house. Clive," she sighed, "had gone on to the lab as usual. They followed him up there and took him along on their hunting party. I purposely stayed home to talk to you."

"Then the Creadys weren't notified."

"No. You see, we never discuss Jane and Mark, and I don't know whether Jim has ever heard the gossip or not. If he has he wouldn't phone Mark, would he?"

"I don't know." Peter watched George Fawcett with amusement and affection. She was—as Mara had remarked—very handsome in an earthy way. Peter wondered idly what sort of person Wallace Fawcett was.

To his surprise he heard himself ask, "What sort of person is Wallace?"

GEORGE was surprised too. "Wallace," she chuckled, "is one of my gods who needs a good dry location. On the credit side he is a splendid scientist, an intelligent and charming man. On the debit he is irresponsible and emotionally immature. If you are trying to fit him into this picture," she added, "he is violently *pro*-York. He and Jim are hometown boys, born and schooled here, and

inseparable companions. The two of them used to make up a foursome with Allie and Helen. The men," she smiled, "claim it was never anything serious, but I notice the girls are still single. Poor lambs!"

Peter stood up a foot or two at a time, until he towered over the swing. "I'm getting the background," he said slowly, "but it doesn't tell us where Jane is, does it? What do you think has happened to her, George?"

"I don't know," she answered. "Except that it isn't any joke. When Jane goes away she fusses over reservations and luggage and clothes. She asks us a dozen times if we think she should take the watermelon cardigan or the printed jersey; she wants to know if we think she'll need her fox scarf; she discusses whether she'll fly or take the train. You know what I mean." She spread her large hands in a weary gesture. "Jane didn't mean to go anywhere this time, Peter."

"Good. Now we're getting someplace." Peter pulled up a chair and seated himself knee to knee with George. "Give me some more reasons why Jane didn't mean to go anywhere."

"Well," George answered, "she was making plans for tomorrow, for one thing. She spoke of having several of us for supper. And Allie says she couldn't find anything gone from Jane's closet except a rose sports dress. Even her purse was there, Peter; right on the dresser."

"Then let's agree that she didn't mean to go. Would she commit suicide?"

"No. Or, rather, why should she? Jane is discontented, but I think she rather enjoys it. And the past year she's been quite happy, what with having Mark on the string and everything."

"And you saw Mark this morning," Peter remembered, "so she hasn't gone away with him. Has she left her husband, perhaps?"

"It's possible. Clive is a wonderful person, but not for Jane."

"Then that gives us one possible explanation," Peter said cheerfully. "How about an accident?"

"She didn't take a car; she understands boats and swims like a fish."

"Amnesia?"

"Traumatic, maybe," George nodded. "I keep wondering if she could have been

hit and robbed. Jane wears beautiful jewels."

"Has anyone checked to see what she was wearing last night?"

"No, but she always had on a diamond wedding ring and a large solitaire of her mother's, and a watch and ring set of rubies and diamonds."

"Does Clive have any money?" Peter asked irrelevantly.

"Mercy, no! It was all Jane's."

"Enough to support a kidnapping theory?"

"Jane's a little old for that," George smiled.

"How about blackmail? Would she disappear to lose a blackmailer?"

"It's quite possible. I hadn't thought of that. But, Peter, if she *planned* to leave wouldn't she have told someone?"

"Are you sure she didn't?"

"No, I'm not."

PETER tipped back in his chair and balanced at a perilous angle. He thought better on an incline. "I don't like to suggest this," he said finally, "but could Jane have been murdered?"

George took it in stride but her face was pale. "I've thought of that too," she admitted, "but I can't make it seem *real*. There were so few of us who knew her or cared about her."

"Just the *pro-Yorks*."

"Yes. Why would any of us kill Jane?"

"That," Peter said mildly, "is the point. Who would have a motive?"

"No one," George said quickly.

Peter sighed. "Then if she were murdered, we would have to look for the well-known tramp. Is that it?"

George flushed uncomfortably. "I'm afraid it is."

"Liar," Peter murmured affectionately. "You've already supplied three of the inner circle with motives for murder."

"I haven't!"

"But you have. Jane was unhappily married: motive for Clive. She was rumored to be in love with Mark Cready: motives for Clive, Mark, and his wife. You're doing fine, honey," he grinned. "Keep right on talking and you'll solve the mystery yourself. Do you still insist that this must be done without the aid of the police?" he asked as he rose.



"Yes." George's voice was flat and final. "It's something that must be done quickly and quietly. If it gets around, Jim York is ruined. I don't like to impose upon such a brief acquaintanceship, Peter, but—will you help us?"

Peter Ponsonby teetered from toe to heel and watched a bluebottle lace together the fragile leaves of a willow tree. He thought of several things. He remembered a time when he had foolishly pursued a murderer and lived to regret it. He recalled the many unpleasant things which could happen to people who took the law into their own hands.

"I'll do what I can," he promised. "But remember that I'm strictly an armchair sleuth and I don't even know these people."

"You will," George said promptly. "I'll get them all together here tonight." Unexpectedly tears filled her eyes. "Thank you, Peter," she whispered.

### III

PETER KNOCKED SOFTLY ON the door and went in. A clean and frilly Candy Too lay on the bed thoughtfully chewing the ear of a disreputable old elephant. Mara stood at the mirror brushing her waist-long hair.

"Rushing things a little, aren't you?" she asked politely, and went on brushing.

"Special preview." He wrapped the shining length of hair around his throat, feeling it warm and soft and alive. "*J'avais ta chevelure autour de mon cou,*" he quoted, "*comme un collier noir autour de ma nuque . . .*"

"On you it looks good." Mara's voice was cool but her eyes were happy.

Peter stretched out on the bed beside Candy and watched Mara weave the long strands of her hair into two thick braids. "What did you learn from Ken?"

"Not much." She twisted the braids into an elaborate coronet. "I found out that Jane is married to Clive Titus, the biochemist, and none too happily—just as you said. It seems that Jane's mother picked out Titus for her. Jane attended high school near San Francisco and went East to college. When she came home her mother trotted out Titus and put the finger on him. I suppose she said, 'Girlie, this is it,' and Jane didn't have spunk enough

to object. Mrs. York's been dead a year or two, and Jane is stuck with Titus."

Peter stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. "Jane had made plans for a supper party tomorrow," he enumerated. "none of her clothes are gone, and she didn't even take a purse with her. It seems pretty evident Jane wasn't expecting to go anywhere. I suggested suicide, but George says Jane was too happy over her affair with Mark Cready."

"The Restoration Cready?"

"The same. He is the 'love life' George referred to when we were over there."

"And he's married, because she saw him carrying home the groceries this morning."

"That's right. George thinks an accident would have been reported before now, so that leaves . . ."

"Death by misadventure," Mara murmured, and her beautiful gray eyes were bright with an unholy gleam.

"Not necessarily," Peter said cautiously. "Jane may be walking around in a fog or lying in a hospital somewhere wondering what her name is. George also went to some pains to explain to me that Jim York is the idol of the town and that gods sometimes have feet of clay."

"This one has brains of clay too. Is my hair all right?"

"Cute. Leave out the combs and wear bows."

"Oh, darling!" Mara protested.

"I like bows. I also like sheer stockings and black lace panties. I'm telling you these things because I know you aim to please. Where was I?"

"Considering Jim York's feet." She placed two crisp bows to advantage.

"They're clay. The mud showed up a year or two ago and shattered his perfect record. It split the town into two factions: the *pro*-Yorks—who deny the clay feet—and the *anti*-Yorks—who can't see anything else."

"Whoops!" Mara cheered. "I'm on the side of the *antis*."

"Sour grapes. The *pro*-Yorks insist that York can't stand any more publicity and they are determined to get Jane back here before the *antis* miss her."

"And that," Mara grinned, "is where you come in."

"Do you mind?"

Mara shook her beribboned head and gave him a swift smile. "No, Peter. You're terribly clever about this sort of thing, and if you can help them you should."

"You're a ghoul and a liar," Peter observed fondly. "You don't consider me in the least clever, but you want me to act as a front for your amateur crime detection."

"That isn't true," Mara said indignantly. "The last thing I want is to be mixed up in another mystery." With a camel's-hair brush she retouched the full sweep of her lower lip. "How do we start finding Jane?" she asked illogically.

"I don't know. First of all we're going to have to get what we can from the inner circle of York fans, because they represent all of Jane's local contacts. We'll meet them tonight. George is getting them together to see what we can make of them."

"What an ingenious way to get invited to a party!" Mara said admiringly. "The bows *are* better than the combs, Peter. What are you thinking about?"

Peter looked up and saw her standing at the foot of the bed: sleek, beautiful, and eminently desirable. With a sigh he got up and crossed to the window. "Just making predictions of things to come," he quipped.

All he could see from the window was a dusty jacaranda tree and Ken Grayson leaning over the fence talking to a girl in a short-sleeved blouse and a plaid skirt. She looked like a student.

"Let's go down and rescue Ken," Peter suggested. "Some campus gadfly has cornered him."

They were too late. A small, freckled-faced girl was coming up the steps, tripping along on worn saddle oxfords. She had a mop of long sun-bleached hair and a nice little face, alert and merry. She stared inquisitively at the Graysons' guests until Ken came up.

"Miss Mallory, Mrs. Larsen," he said. "Peggy Ann, this big oaf is the celebrated Professor Ponsonby." Looking at once amused and annoyed, Ken rumbled the girl's hair and added, "This untidy-looking wench is one of our most promising graduate students, Pete, but you'd never know it to look at her. Besides that she has a splendid young husband who came back from the South Pacific with every citation in the book."

PEGGY ANN'S bright eyes filled with tears and she stooped quickly to Candy Too. "Hello, honey," she said. "What's your name?"

Candy looked at her critically. "Little Beaver," she said finally. "Me Little Beaver, you betchum."

"She wants to know your real name," Mara smiled. "Not your make-believe name."

"Me Little Beaver."

"Her name's Candida Allison," Mara supplied. "But we call her Candy Too."

"How unusual!" Peggy Ann reached out for Candy, who deftly avoided her by sitting down suddenly. "Is that Candy T-o-o, or Candy T-w-o, or what?"

It was an explanation they were all very tired of making. "Her mother's name is Candida," Mara said politely, "but we've always called her Candy, and . . ."

"I'm Candy Too."

"I see what you mean," Peggy Ann laughed.

"All right," Ken ordered. "That's enough of being sociable. You didn't come to call, you know. What's your questionnaire today?"

"Still toothpaste," Peggy Ann said pertly. "Are you getting terribly tired of toothpaste? I'm about through with it, and then I'm going into men's shirts." She unzipped a bulging brief case and took out a wrinkled sheaf of mimeographed papers.

She marked hieroglyphics on several lines and then asked, in a startlingly slow and monotonous voice, "What brand of toothpaste did you purchase last?"

"Ipana," Grayson answered solemnly.

"Why did you select this brand?"

"It tastes good."

With a return to her customary animation Peggy Ann asked, "Are you being funny, Dr. Grayson, or is that your answer?"

"I swear it's the only reason I have, Peggy Ann, and I know better than to invalidate your results by giving you a phony answer."

"All right then. Where was I? Oh yes! What brand do you plan to buy the next time you purchase toothpaste?"

"The same. Ipana."

"Where did you purchase your last tube of toothpaste?"

"I didn't. I told my sister I needed

some and she bought it. Does that spoil everything?"

"No, that's fine. One more question: Do you recall any toothpaste ads that you have seen lately in magazines or newspapers?"

Peter, who liked guessing games, thought of two.

"I'm afraid I don't," Ken apologized.

"All right, Dr. Grayson, that's all for this time." Peggy Ann's voice had the artificial brightness of a dentist's. She shuffled her pages and put a reasonably fresh one on top. "Would either of you answer this for me?" she asked hopefully.

"I'd be glad to," Mara smiled. "You're working in Applied Psychology, aren't you? Psychology is my department."

"Is it really? Then you know how hard it is to get subjects. Will you give me this data?"

"Surely." Mara leaned over the girl's shoulder and ran a long, rose-tipped finger across the bottom of the mimeographed page. "You have the time of the interview, of course. My income classification would be 'C,' my age is twenty-nine, and my address is 632 Manfred Street, Los Angeles."

"That's everything, thanks." Peggy Ann shed her vitality and became the anonymous voice of the professional interviewer. "What brand of toothpaste did you purchase last?"

When she had finished with Mara she said, "Now do I get yours too, Professor? I'd be awfully grateful."

"Surely. I use Calox."

"Oh, I'm not interested in *powders*." Peggy Ann returned her papers to the brief case and zipped it up in one lightning gesture. Her interest in Dr Ponsonby ended with his unfortunate choice of a dentrifice. "I'll go along and retest Allie," she told them. "Good-by for now."

Her short plaid skirt swirled through the door and a moment later they heard the slow, uninflected questions from the direction of the kitchen.

"Our department crawls with those," Mara smiled. "Is Peggy Ann working for her Master's?"

"Yes. She's a damned nuisance, of course, but the whole town feels so sorry for her that they all co-operate. Her hus-

band," he explained, "came back shot to hell, physically and emotionally. Peg has a big load to carry, and we all want to see her get to teaching as quickly as possible."

## IV

THE FOUR OF THEM were the first to arrive at George Fawcett's party. The wide porch looked cool and inviting, and long doors opening into the living room gave a sense of space which was strictly illusory. George had arranged card tables to form a buffet and decorated them with bowls of zinnias and two hurricane lamps. From some source—the Country Club, Peter suspected—she had obtained platters of delectable hors d'oeuvres. For an impromptu party she had accomplished wonders.

Allie and George fell to bickering comfortably.

"You know I like to knit," Allie was saying irritably. "Why don't you have a decent light out here?" She moved as close as possible to one of the lamps and peered near-sightedly at her work.

"You knit too much," George answered. "It's a disease with you, Allie. You've lost the ability to sit quietly and enjoy people. And you're dropping more stitches than you're knitting."

"That's because I'm tired," Alicia snapped. "Personally, I had enough party last night to hold me for a long time; and it took me until two o'clock this morning to clean up the kitchen."

"Both Helen and I offered to do dishes," George reminded her, "so don't tell me now what a job it was. I love parties." George stretched out contentedly and accepted the cigarette offered. "Especially parties for visitors," she smiled. "You and Mara missed a wonderful time last night, Peter." The flame of the match was reflected in her upturned eyes.

Peter blew out the light and said, "Really? We hate to miss things. Was it cards, supper, or what?"

"What," Ken grinned. "It was too hot to do anything but sit around and drink beer. Afterwards some of us got into a poker session, and about twelve the girls fed us. It was just an ordinary clambake."

"English Department?" Peter asked.

"Yes, and some other people."

That didn't tell anything, and yet Peter felt that George had introduced the subject for some specific purpose. He tried another approach.

"Was it a large party?"

"Sixteen, I think."

"No," Allie said particularly, "seventeen were invited, Kenneth, and twelve came."

George picked it up fast. "I wondered about that," she said. "There were a lot of the old guard missing. What happened to Jim and Helen?"

Alicia scowled at her knitting and picked up a stitch. "Jim had papers to grade," she answered shortly. "And you know how Helen is: she won't be a fifth wheel anywhere."

"I was an extra woman," George said placidly. "It never bothers me."

"You're married," Ken reminded her. "Helen isn't."

"How true," George murmured. "And where were the Creadys? And weren't Jane and Clive invited?"

"This light is impossible," Allie said crossly. "May I turn the lamp up, George, or will it smoke?"

No one answered George's questions.

The arm of coincidence could be stretched but it had its limits. While the conversational tide washed around him Peter checked off the *pro*-Yorks. Five of them had been absent from the Graysons' party on the night of Jane's disappearance; a fact which George wanted brought to his attention and Alicia didn't. He felt a premonitory shiver run up his spine. Mara's lovely face, pale in the lamplight, looked intent and preoccupied, as though she too were counting noses.

James York's long black sedan slid to the curb and both front doors opened. As soon as the slamming had stopped, a voice floated out of the darkness.

"Jim!" it called. "May I see you a minute, Jim?"

**I**T WAS a young voice, or at least it created the illusion of youth. It was only after York's figure had crossed the street that Peter realized it had been Miss Herrick who called. Another man came toward the house: of average height and weight; faceless in the night.

"I arrive alone, as usual, George," he

said. "Helen has waylaid my esteemed father-in-law." The voice was dry, rusty with disuse.

"Stop feuding, Clive." George pulled herself out of the deep chair and went over to the steps. "I'm glad you came. You're going to meet some charming people."

"Really?" Clive sounded skeptical. When he stepped into the shaft of light from the doorway Peter saw that he had an acid face with deep lines etched from nose to mouth. Bright dark eyes were carefully lidded.

George performed the introduction, and Peter found himself clasping a hand which was strong and thin and sensitive.

"You teach English, I understand." Titus made it sound a little better than complete idleness, but not much. "You also write murder mysteries, don't you? Or is that another Ponsonby?"

"I've written a couple," Peter admitted. "Titus didn't look like a person who would need—or approve—escape fiction. "Do you read many of them?" he asked.

"One a night." Titus lounged beside him on the porch railing and lighted a cigarette.

Curiouser and curiouser! "You must read very rapidly."

Titus shrugged. "I don't read them through," he explained. "I'm interested in character, not in methods. It's a sort of game I play with myself." He smiled thinly. "I read until I know who committed the crime and then I turn to the back and verify it."

Peter was shocked. "That's very unorthodox," he said reprovingly. "What is your batting average?"

"I'm usually right." The thin smile flickered briefly.

"How far do you have to read?"

"That varies. Fifty pages does it, as a rule. Sometimes a chapter is enough." The implication was clear.

"Such omniscience must be very gratifying," Peter said stiffly. "Excuse me."

He moved away and began talking to George, annoyed with Titus and angry with himself for being annoyed.

Helen and York joined the party a few minutes later: York, dark and smiling, looked like something out of *Esquire* in a white flannel suit; Helen was sleek and

smart in a dark sheer that did nice things for her molten hair and gooseberry eyes.

She refused beer and came over to Ponsonby. "I understand you and Miss Mallory are being married this week end."

"No." Peter shook his head sadly. "We're letting Mara's sister have a second honeymoon while we take care of her youngster. Besides," he grinned, "Mara wants a wedding with all the trimmings."

"Really?" Miss Herrick opened her green eyes very wide. "Weddings are lovely, of course," she said, "but the important thing is getting married, isn't it?"

"I think so. You teach English, don't you?"

"I did." She smiled apologetically.

"You're fortunate to be able to retire so young," Peter said gallantly.

A cloud crossed Miss Herrick's delicately shadowed eyes. "Malvolio says some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them," she smiled. "The same is true of retirement. The college has outgrown the old standards," Helen explained. "It used to be the teaching that mattered, but now credentials and degrees mean more than ability. That sounds bitter, doesn't it?" She laughed lightly, apologizing again. "I'm not bitter, not in the least. I am delighted to be free to do as I please; to see shows and read books. I admire your books very much, Professor. Your books on the War Poets are marvelous. I would like to get your autograph on my copies while you are here."

"Thank you. I'd be happy to autograph them."

"Does Miss Mallory also write?"

"Yes. Poetry."

"How nice." Miss Herrick's glance went over Mara's sleek perfection in careful appraisal. "Then she and Professor York should have a great deal in common. Pardon me, I see the Creadys coming." She moved toward the steps, tall, graceful, unhurried.

QUITE A GAL, Peter thought appreciatively. It was unfortunate that such a nice person should lead such an arid life. Like Alicia. On the threshold of matrimony, Peter felt a great compassion for those who were not.

The Creadys would complete the party. Peter stepped behind the improvised buffet

in the hope of observing them before he was observed. Mara's face, a pale moon, materialized at his shoulder.

"Hi!"

"Hi. These are the last, aren't they?" she asked.

A man moved into the pool of lamp-light: tall, dark, and classically beautiful.

"Huba, huba! Dig that!"

Peter brought Mara down to earth by stepping smartly on her bare toes.

"Ouch!" Mara cradled her foot in her hand and massaged it absent-mindedly. "Isn't he gorgeous?" she breathed. "And look at his wife! They'll do it every time."

The woman behind Mark Cready had drab hair and a plain, intelligent face. Her one attraction was an exquisite figure which demanded attention in spite of her unfashionable clothes.

"Georgianna's in the kitchen," Helen was saying, "so I'm going to introduce her guests." The prominent eyes swung around like twin spotlights and picked up the pair behind the table. "No fair hiding!" she called gaily. "Come out and meet some more of our English Department."

At close range Mark was even handsomer; his wife plainer.

"I'm glad to meet you," Mark said seriously. "Very glad." He gave Ponsonby a smooth, soft hand. "I've been wanting to talk to you."

Peter moved out of the light to the swing, and Mark sat on an ottoman at his knee. "I've wanted to meet you too," Peter said.

"Why?"

"To talk about your book, of course."

Peter crowded tobacco into his pipe and scowled over the match. "You made a reference to Congreve that I question. Chapter Five, I believe. You say in there that—"

"Dr. Ponsonby," Mark interrupted, "have you ever done any detective work?"

Peter was not ready for the transition. "What do you mean?"

"Are you just an armchair sleuth, or do you really know the mechanics of crime detection? Have you gone around with real investigators?"

"I'm strictly armchair." Peter grinned. "I only know one cop and I hate him."

Mark fixed him with a steady dark stare. "But you must understand criminal psy-

chology," he persisted, "or how could you write so convincingly?"

"Whether I do or not," Peter answered dryly, "is a matter of opinion. Miss Mal-lory—who is a first-rate psychologist—says that I pull some awful boners."

"Really?" Mark's voice mirrored his disappointment. "Then you couldn't help me," he said, and started to rise.

"I could try," Peter offered quickly. "Sometimes just a fresh point of view is helpful. Is something the matter?"

"I don't know," Mark said. "Has any-one mentioned Mrs. Titus to you?"

"Yes," Peter answered carefully. "I've heard of her."

"Did they tell you she had disappeared?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

Mark's long-lashed eyes were candid and surprised. "From Peggy Ann Larsen," he explained. "She came to our house today with her toothpaste survey and she told us then. Do you know if they've heard anything yet?"

"Nothing."

"Have they said anything to the police?"

"Not so far as I know. Should they?"

"No," Mark answered quickly. "It's much better if they don't. I was afraid Alicia had told Amos."

"Amos?"

"Amos Schroeder, our chief of police. He courts Alicia with monotonous persistence."

"I see." Peter smoked in silence, thinking it over. "Oh well," he said finally, with false airiness, "Jane's absence doesn't mean anything. If anyone is going to worry, let it be her husband."

"He wouldn't worry," Mark said bitterly. "He wouldn't care. He's a *scientist*." He laughed scornfully.

"So," Peter purred. "When Jane wanted understanding she had to look elsewhere, is that it?"

MARK rubbed his short curls distract-edly. "All the warmth or affection Jane ever got," he assured Peter, "was from me. Now that she has disappeared, I feel very guilty because Jane fancies herself in love with me." He apologized with his angelic smile. "I feel very sorry for Jane and I'm fond of her and I sometimes see her alone. Quite often, in fact," he admitted, "but it isn't anything *serious*."

Peter began to understand why Mark Cready had drifted from one university to another. "When did you see her last?" he asked.

"Thursday." Mark's face was a pale mask except for the dark brows and the band of black lashes. "We agreed then that I should phone her on Friday about six." He smiled faintly. "Before Clive came home for dinner," he explained. "I did, and we decided to skip the Graysons' party and meet on the *Sprite*. That's my boat. We were to get there about nine. I told Elizabeth I had a committee meeting. And then," he frowned, "Jane called me about eight-thirty at the house."

"Was that unusual?"

"Certainly!" He made Peter sound very naive. "Jane was terribly agitated."

"Why?"

"I suppose Clive was in the next room or something," Mark said impatiently. "Anyway, she wanted me to know that she couldn't keep our date. She promised to call me today."

"So what did you do?"

Mark shrugged. "I'd said I had a committee meeting, so I left the house at nine and went up on the campus. I walked clear over the hill and cut back toward the beach, coming out about a mile above the pier. On the way back I made sure that the *Sprite* was firmly moored and then went on home. It was about eleven, I guess, when I got there."

"And that's all you know about Jane's disappearance?"

"Absolutely all."

"What do you think has happened to Jane?" he asked at length.

"I have three theories," Mark said unexpectedly. "They are all rather terrible."

"One at a time, please," Peter requested weakly.

"First," Cready said, "I think she may have left her husband. Because of me, of course. Second, she may have committed suicide. For the same reason. Third, Clive may have killed her."

"Same reason?"

"Yes."

The three theories revealed something of Mark's importance to Mark. Peter felt a little numb from the impact of so much self-love. "Aren't you being a little melodramatic?" he suggested.

Mark shook his dark curls. "I think not. Jane loves me and despises Clive."

"Did you ever give her reason to believe that you wanted her to leave Clive?"

"Of course not!" Indignation warmed Mark's voice. "After all, Professor, I'm married."

Peter swallowed his retort and sighed. "Why are you telling me all this?" he asked.

"Because I want you to find her. As soon as I heard you were coming up this week end I was determined to enlist your co-operation."

"Why didn't you go to the police?" Peter asked slyly.

"And let Elizabeth know that I'd been meeting Jane?" Mark said scornfully. "Besides," he added, "there are reasons why *none* of us can go to the police. Will you find her?"

"How?"

"Oh, I don't understand the mechanics of these things," Mark said indifferently. "I assumed that with your experience you would know how to go about it discreetly."

It sounded like a large assignment. "All right," Peter said again. "I'll do what I can."

MARK rose and stretched with the grace of a cat. It was apparent that he had disposed of the responsibility to his satisfaction. "Thank you," he smiled. "Now I'd like a game of ping-pong. Do you care to play?"

Peter ground his teeth. "I don't feel like games," he answered grimly. "Just run along and let me be alone."

Garbo and I, he thought derisively, and took a long drink of beer. So now he had met Mark Cready. Peter thought of George Fawcett and her observations about gods. Mark had written the greatest book ever written on the subject dearest to Ponsonby's heart, and for that he could overlook a lot. Peter turned the cold glass around and around in his hands and thought about heroes and hero worship, and about colleges and the strange allegiances which could warp judgment and hamper reason.

Suddenly he sat very still, listening. Something, or someone, had moved in the bushes beside the porch. He counted to twenty, but there was no repetition of the sound. Casually he walked to the end of

the house and looked out over the floodlit garden. Four men, he observed, were playing badminton, two women were playing ping-pong, one sat by the barbecue pit smoking, and one was missing. Silently cursing his myopia, Peter took a sandwich from the table and went back to the railing. Pretty obviously the woman in the shrubbery wasn't Alicia or George, since either one of them could see him at any time. That left Mark's wife or Helen Herrick.

He leaned over the side and spoke directly toward the spot where the noise had originated. "Peek-a-boo," he said pleasantly. "Come on up and be sociable."

It worked. A woman laughed softly and a minute later Elizabeth Cready came up the steps.

"What bright eyes you have," she said. "Far better than mine; I didn't know there was anyone here."

Peter let it pass.

"The games look strenuous," he yawned. "I should think all of you would be done in after the Graysons' affair last night."

"Most of us weren't there," Elizabeth pointed out.

"Don't you care for faculty parties," Peter asked, "or did you have something better to do?"

"We couldn't go because"—there was the faintest hesitation before she said—"because Mark had a committee meeting."

"Mrs. Cready," Peter said gently, "how much of the conversation between Mark and me did you overhear?"

Elizabeth sighed noisily. "I heard most of it. All of it that mattered." She stretched out in one of the old chairs.

"What sort of person are you, Peter Ponsonby?" Her voice drifted out of the shadows, amused and faintly mocking. "Do you like to have worried wives pour out their troubles? Do you soothe their raddled nerves and send them back to the kitchen sink comforted for having talked with you?" Her face was wan.

"I treat what they tell me confidentially," Peter replied, "and I am reputed to have a very light touch with the ladies: cozy but not troublesome."

"You make yourself sound lovely," she laughed. "Well, I heard what Mark told you and I heard you say you'd try to find Jane for us, so I might as well fill in



what I know. You see, I've always known about Mark and Jane. I knew about the faculty wife at Berkeley and the faculty daughter at the University of Virginia. Before that there was a departmental secretary and several others. Mark can't help that sort of thing. Nature threw the book at him: looks, charm, everything. That is, everything but judgment. You are thinking that I am prejudiced," she said wisely, "and of course I am, but the point is that when Mark says it wasn't serious he *means* it. These things are never serious, so far as Mark's concerned."

SHE laughed shortly. "If it weren't so damaging professionally, it would be funny. But it isn't funny. It's tragic. Some woman falls in love with Mark, people start to talk, and the Creadys move on to a new post. Pretty soon," she said bitterly, "we will have exhausted the academic roster, and after that I don't know what we'll do."

"Did it ever occur to Mark to say No, No, a thousand times No?"

"Even his No sounds like an invitation," Elizabeth said cynically. "No," she sighed, "there's nothing he can do about it, apparently. Mark's Mark. So far *l'affaire Titus* has gone according to schedule and I haven't worried too much about it, but now Jane has disappeared."

"Yes," Peter agreed, "she certainly has. Do you happen to know where she is?"

"I haven't the faintest, but I heard Mark's three theories, as he called them, and at least one made sense. Jane could have left Titus because of Mark."

"Do you think she is that seriously interested?"

"Mark's charm is pretty fatal. I've known women to do strange things because of him."

"Did it strike you that all of Mark's suggestions were highly egotistical?" Peter queried.

"Naturally. That's Mark."

"O.K. What did you make of the other two ideas?"

After a minute Elizabeth chuckled softly. "They were typical of Mark," she answered, "but highly improbable. Jane wouldn't commit suicide. Jane loves life. And Clive wouldn't kill her. Killing is

brutal and quick, and Clive would enjoy something more refined and deliberate."

"You hate Clive."

"I hate cruelty." Elizabeth's cigarette butt glowed past Peter's shoulder and fell to the damp grass with a faint hiss. "I can overlook lots of faults," Elizabeth said. "Mark's sort and yours and mine, but not cruelty."

"All right, so much for Mark's three theories," Peter smiled. "Do you have any of your own?"

"No," Elizabeth said quickly. "No, I have no idea what has happened. The best I can do for you is to corroborate what Mark said. I know that Jane *did* call at eight-thirty, because I answered the phone first. She *did* sound agitated, and Mark *did* go off somewhere about nine to save face.

"Do you think Jane has been killed?"

"No, I said Clive wouldn't—"

"All right, let's put it this way: why *wouldn't* Jane be killed?"

"How do you mean?" Elizabeth asked slowly. "Killed—how?"

"Murdered."

"Oh no!" In the darkness her voice was a frightened gasp. "Please don't think that," she begged. "No one would have any reason to kill Jane."

"What do you think has happened to her, then?" Peter asked again.

"I don't know. Really I don't!"

"Make a guess."

"She could have left Clive because of Mark," Elizabeth repeated wearily. "I suppose she could have met with an accident. I suppose lots of things could have happened to her. But not—murder, Professor. Her disappearance is no joke, but it's not—it's not—I hope you find her."

"The police could do that."

"We can't go to the police."

"I'll do what I can," Peter sighed. "I'll do as much as anyone can do working unofficially."

"That's all we can ask. Thank you." Elizabeth rose tiredly from the deep chair and stepped into the light. Her plain, intelligent face was haggard, but she lifted her chin resolutely and attempted a smile. "You wouldn't play ping-pong with Mark," she said. "Perhaps you'll play with me?"

Peter shook his head and grinned. "I don't play. But I'll come down and watch Mara beat you."

## V

"IT WASN'T much of a party." Alicia yawned and reached down to rub her ankles. "I wonder what possessed George to have people in tonight of all nights?"

"Maybe she thought it would take their minds off of Jane," Mara suggested tactfully. "Goodness, I'm sleepy!" She gave a convincing imitation of fatigue. "Would it be very rude if I ran right off to bed?"

The Graysons' relief was obvious. "Not at all," Alicia assured her. "I shall too."

"Then that makes it unanimous." Ken snapped off the porch light and went through the kitchen to lock the door. Peter followed the two women up the stairs and said good night.

In his own room he changed from the crumpled linen to slacks and a jacket, and thirty minutes later, when the house was quiet, walked along the hall and tapped on Mara's door. A light snicked on, and presently one suspicious gray eye appeared in the crack of the door.

"You smell like a brewery," Mara said coldly. "What do you want?"

She looked enchanting; what Peter could see of her. "Darling," he began, "why don't we—"

"Absolutely not. Good night." The door closed.

Peter grinned. Mara had a one-track mind, but it was a nice track. He tapped again and waited for the door to open.

"What now, lecher?"

"I was going to ask you to go sleuthing," he whispered. "The night is still young and the world's our oyster."

"Good!" Mara's long braids swung in violent approval. "I'll be ready in a minute."

In something less than that she stepped into the hall. "All done but my mouth," she hissed. "I'll finish in the car." She had pulled slacks over her pajamas and carried play shoes in her hand. The total effect was that of a schoolgirl who had grown too fast.

"No key," she observed when they reached the downstairs hall. "How are we going to get back in?"

"Leave the house open."

"And have someone steal Candy?" she asked indignantly. "I don't think!"

"All right. Look." Peter led the way to the kitchen and turned on the light. "See," he said complacently. "Old house, old locks." He flipped a ring of assorted skeleton keys from his pocket and fitted one into the old-fashioned keyhole. It worked.

Peter and Mara stepped out and locked the door behind them. It was a fine night for adventure: warm and dark, with the lushness of damp grass and honeysuckle thick about them. It was a fine night for lots of things. Peter took Mara into his arms and kissed her wide, thick-lashed eyes, the tip of her pert nose, and her generous mouth.

"Yummy! No lipstick. I love you."

"I love you too." Her arms went around his neck tight. "Don't let anything happen to you," she whispered.

Peter had forgotten the possibility of danger. Mara's words sent cold-footed ants scampering along his back. "Nothing will," he said reassuringly, and kept his fingers crossed. "But now that you mention it, perhaps you'd better run back to bed and let me prow around alone."

"Fat chance," Mara sneered. "Here are the car keys."

Arm in arm they walked through the sweet night to the street. Peter let the car roll to the corner before he started the motor; and then it whirled into life softly, hardly disturbing the quiet.

"What did you make of the *pro*-Yorks?" he asked.

"Except for Jane's stepfather and husband, they are all worried sick, Peter."

"Um-hmn. There is more to this than meets the eye. To coin a phrase."

"I can't bear Jim York," Mara said glumly. "Maybe I distrust his bounciness, but there's something phony about him."

"You just can't stand to have him included in all those anthologies," Peter ribbed. "He's a good joe."

"So I've heard," Mara answered caustically. "I've heard it so many times I could urp at the mention of his name."

"How about the others?"

"Clive Titus is horrid. Jane must be an awful pill if she lives with him."

"Was there anyone whom you liked?"

"Several," Mara nodded. "The Creadys are charming. Mark's terribly egotistical, of course, and he has a wandering eye, but

he's delightful to talk with and fun to look at."

"Prepositions," Peter reminded her. "And Elizabeth?"

"Elizabeth is marvelous."

"Is she?"

Mara turned to stare at him. "Why, of course. She's intelligent and unaffected, and absolutely mad about Mark."

"I know. Being mad about her husband could get her into a lot of trouble."

"Where are you going?" Mara asked as they reached the coast road.

"I thought we might have a look at Mark's boat. After all, we lose track of Jane sometime between that eight-thirty phone call she made and the next morning when Clive found her bed all neat and tidy. Do we have a choice of piers, do you know?"

"There's only one, and it must be to the right, Peter, because we didn't pass it coming into town."

"Good girl." He swung the car north. "They certainly roll up the sidewalks early."

"Hick town. It's awfully dark."

"And popular." Peter jerked his head toward the cars nosed out onto the hard shoulder of the road.

"So now we find the night life of the village," Mara remarked. "Tsk! Tsk! It makes one wonder what the younger generation is coming to, doesn't it?"

"You sound as prissy as Miss Herrick. How do you like her, by the way?"

Mara lighted two cigarettes and handed one to Peter. "She's all right," she answered indifferently. "Typical spinster. Not, I might add, much different from our hostess, except that Helen Herrick is a much stronger person than Alicia. Helen," she added, "is punchy about Jim York."

"Is she?" Peter asked interestedly. "He's not in love with her."

"Yes he is, but he's cagey. He's playing hard to get. There's the pier."

Peter pulled in between two battered jalopies and switched off the lights.

Carefully averting their eyes from the parked cars, Peter and Mara stepped out and walked along the sand. The pier held no attractions beyond a shooting gallery and a couple of hot-dog stands, and was deserted at this hour. Peter leaned over the railing and played his flashlight along

the water. "Looks more like a lake than part of the ocean, doesn't it?"

"Um-hmn. Still and clear. I wish I had another hot dog."

"Get your mind off your stomach," Peter ordered. "Do you see the *Sprite*?"

"Nope, *Leilani, Corsair, Pilikia, Tramp*," Mara read. "*Ida Mae II, Hussy*, but no *Sprite*."

"Lose somethin'?"

THE VOICE came out of the darkness, thin and querulous. They saw a wizened old man with half a dozen fish poles over his shoulder and a gunny sack and lantern in his hand.

"We were looking for a boat called the *Sprite*," Peter said pleasantly.

"She's moored farther out. T'other side." The man leaned forward and peered inquisitively from rheumy eyes. "Strangers here, be'n't you?"

Peter gave up the unequal struggle. He turned off the flashlight and leaned back against the pier. "Yes, we're spending the week end with Dr. Grayson. He's teaching summer session at the college."

"Grayson? Grayson?" The old fisherman chewed the name over with his tobacco and spat them out together. "Grayson!" he snapped. "I've knowed him since he was no bigger'n that. Little smart aleck. Always was too big fer his britches. He's got a right nice sister, though. I've knowed Alicia all her life and her pa before her. I've seed three generations grow up here."

"One of the early settlers," Mara said reverently. The fisherman moved over to look at her, and what he saw he liked.

"Yep." He showed toothless gums in a senile grin. "I come here in eighty-three. There wasn't nothing in this county then but big ranches, and where the town stands now was jest a lot of saloons and who—" He rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. "Saloons," he ended lamely.

"Isn't that marvelous?" Mara applauded.

Then her smile turned just a little sly, "You see a good bit of the town's night life from where you sit." She nodded toward the dark row of parked cars.

"Kid stuff." The old man spat over the railing. "Don't interest me none. But on the boats, now, I see things that *ain't* kid stuff. That there's the real McCoy."

Peter was horrified to hear Mara ask, "Is Mrs. Titus still meeting Dr. Cready on the *Sprite*?"

The old man's smile was loose and evil. "She's met him some," he admitted. "He ain't the only one, neither."

"I thought as much." Mara yawned delicately, indifferently. "I guess Jane doesn't come to the boat much any more."

"Oh, she still uses the *boat*, all right. Seed her no longer ago than last night."

"With Dr. Cready?" Mara's voice mirrored her astonishment.

"Nope. Ain't sayin' who she met. I'm not one to gossip. But she took the boat," he gummed, "and headed south 'long about nine o'clock."

Mara favored him with a patronizing smile. "Oh, that wasn't Mrs. Titus," she said.

"'Twas too," he snapped crossly. "She called to me same like she always does. Ten, fifteen minutes later she swung along the pier and went that way."

Impatience outweighed judgment, and Peter asked, "How long was she gone?"

The fisherman looked at him with the contempt he would have shown for a trout fly. "Couldn't say, mister," he answered sullenly. "I took my lines and went home 'long about eleven, same like I was doing tonight afore I stopped to gab." He shouldered the poles and tottered off into the darkness.

"Nasty old man," Mara shuddered. "We learned a lot, though, didn't we?"

"You did," Peter conceded generously. "When the cereal company sends my Dick Tracy badge I'll let you wear it. Let's find the boat."

"Let's don't." Mara laid a restraining hand on his arm. "That old he-gossip will lurk in the shrubbery until he finds out what we're doing. We'd better go back to the car."

WHEN they were headed back toward the main intersection Peter said, "I'll like to prowlsouth of here for a few miles. Your smelly friend said Jane left the pier a little after nine and Mark says the boat was safely moored at eleven, so Jane couldn't have gone far. I wonder who was with Jane on her nocturnal voyage."

"Maybe she was alone," Mara suggested. "The fisherman wasn't very clear

about that. Maybe she was alone and went to meet someone. Maybe that someone killed her and brought the boat back."

"You have a ghoulish mind. What did he do with her body?"

"Weighted it and threw it in the bay. Everyone says how deep and still this water is."

"Sure. They also mention the fact that it is crystal clear. Or hadn't you noticed?" As they crossed Cyprus Avenue he said, "Keep your eyes open from here on."

"Nothing but beach houses," Mara reported a little later. "The dinky kind for week ends." A mile farther on she said, "We've outrun the cottages. It's state beach or something. Still no piers."

"I see something up ahead," Peter remarked after a while.

"Um-hmn. It's a promontory jutting out into the water."

"Looks like it's wooded."

"It is. Slow up, Peter. It's a perfectly wonderful place for foul play," Mara said wistfully.

"Or even for a secret meeting," Peter added conservatively. "What's that?"

"A fence. It separates that whole headland from the highway."

Peter switched off the ignition and turned his spotlight along the right-hand side of the road. It was a barbed-wire fence, all right, high and in good repair. Beyond it there was a thick shrubby growth and a couple of No Trespassing signs. Far out he could see the silhouettes of tall trees.

They parked the coupe in the shadow of a pepper tree and cursed their way through the tightly stretched strands of barbed wire. Hot and ragged, they struggled through the dense thicket and came out finally on a rocky bluff. A beam of light showed them a shallow beach a few feet below the level on which they stood, and beyond that the water glinted palely.

"Oh, fine," Mara sighed. "We hack our way through that jungle in order to look at this. No pier, no nothing."

"Courage, my girl. The beach may show something." Peter sat down and slid to the sand. Mara followed his progress by the beam of light he carried.

"Not much beach," he called back. "Is the tide in or out?"

"Without waves, how should I know?" Mara said crossly.

"No matter. Want to go swimming?"

"No."

After a minute the light went out and Mara said, "What are you doing, Peter?"

"Undressing," he answered placidly.

"Yipe!"

"The sand has been washed smooth by today's tides, but I want to see how much water there is off this point."

"I'll loan you my lipstick," Mara jeered, "and you can draw a Plimsoll line around your middle."

The only answer she got was the thrashing of the water.

"Deep enough for you?" she inquired politely.

"Deep enough for a battleship."

"Peter!" Mara called sharply. "Where are you? Your voice sounds miles away."

Peter grinned and swung back toward the shore. "I'm right here. Coming in." On the sand he pulled on his shorts and trousers and picked up the flashlight. "Why don't you wear petticoats?" he complained. "I'm dripping."

"Use your shirt. The night's warm."

PETER rubbed the shirt across his streaming back and cleaned wet sand from his feet. When he had on his shoes and socks he climbed up the bank and threw the wet shirt to Mara.

"That's it, moppet. Let's get along home. We can't learn anything more here."

"What's the matter with the light?"

"Batteries are about gone. Keep close behind me."

"Don't worry," Mara said morosely. "I'll *have* to keep close behind you if I want to get out of this rattrap. Is this the place Jane came with the boat, Peter?"

"Probably. It's the right distance and it's certainly secluded."

"Darn it all, I can't see a thing!" Mara grumbled.

Peter slowed up and walked ahead, swinging the beam from side to side. Mara continued to complain for a while, and then Peter realized that she had stopped muttering and picked up speed. The going was easier and the trees had given way to low scrub. "Everything all right back there?" he asked.

There was no answer.

"Mara," he said sharply, "are you all

right?" He played the beam among the bushes. He was alone.

Panic caught him before reason could be summoned. His scalp crawled coldly and blood pounded in his throat.

"Mara!" he shouted, and was surprised to hear how craven his voice sounded. "Mara! Where are you?"

From far to the right came a weak and frightened answer. "Stand still," Peter commanded, "and keep talking. I'll come to you."

He floundered about in the bushes, working in the general direction of Mara's voice, stopping occasionally to listen. Presently the tone was louder and less frightened. The next time he paused he could make out the words. It was an old and ribald story. Peter grinned admiringly.

"Good girl," he shouted, and wagged the weak flashlight. "Can you see me?"

"No, Peter, but you sound close."

"Turn around, you idiot!"

"Oh. Oh, Peter, you never looked so good to me!"

"Come on now, before these batteries give out."

Mara crashed through the bushes toward him, collided with a tree, swore, and sank from sight with a startled gasp.

"For heaven's sake," Peter snapped, "why don't you watch your step?" Mara rose from a clump of brush and staggered toward him. The batteries were still strong enough to show him how pale she was. "What happened?" he asked. "If it's a sprained ankle you're out of luck; you're too big to carry." He ran forward and caught her as her knees sagged. "Mara, what's wrong?"

"P-Peter," she whispered, "I—I—I think—" She leaned against him heavily for a minute and then her chin came up and she laughed shakily. "Sorry, darling, but I tripped over s-something. It was s-soft and givey."

"Damn this flashlight. Show me where it was."

"Oh, Peter," she begged, "let's don't! I'm afraid! Let's go home!"

"Not on your life," he said grimly. "Come on, while we have some light."

They picked their way back to the clump from which Mara had risen and circled it cautiously. The light was almost gone. By leaning low Peter discovered the bushes

Mara had broken in falling, and between two clumps of brush he saw a silk-clad leg. Mara held the flash while he pushed the shrubs away. The leg had a mate, and both were joined to a very attractive body.

"I knew it," Mara chattered. "Acres and acres of ground and I have to fall over a c-c-corpse!"

The feeble light flickered and went out.

## VI

PETER PONSONBY gave a sigh of relief. "I think it's Jane, all right," he said with satisfaction. Hand in hand they edged north, away from the body and toward the sea. When the trees thinned they saw pale moonlight shimmering on the still water.

"We're going to make ourselves a little conspicuous," Peter admitted, "but that can't be helped. Sit down on the edge and slide to the sand."

When the hard-packed beach was under their feet they circled the headland to the south side.

"Start picking up driftwood," Peter ordered.

"Oh, fun. A wiener bake, no doubt." Mara ran after small branches, and when she had an armful she deposited them in the shelter of the bank. "What now, Eagle Scout?"

"How did you know? Here." Peter emptied his inner coat pocket of a half dozen letters. "This is one way to dispose of bills," he observed, and carefully opened and twisted each page. "Now this is the scout part." He drew a knife from his pocket and whittled shavings onto the pile of papers; the larger sticks he roughed and fired with the blade. "Now you make a tepee. Decorative, isn't it?"

"Very. Do you rub sticks together, or can we use a common old match?"

"A match." Peter lighted one and watched the breeze claim it. The second caught and the blaze sprang high. Peter looked smug. "As a scout," he said, "I had to do it with one match, but that's a good many years ago, after all."

"You aren't kidding. What do we do now? Add more wood?"

"A little at a time. You keep the home fires burning and I'll look for a pine branch." He scrambled up the bank and

searched among the bushes until he had found a small dry bough, thick with pitch. When the torch was burning steadily they extinguished the fire and climbed the bank.

Carefully shielding the flame, Peter stepped along through the rank underbrush. Almost immediately he found the silken leg. "I'm sorry, darling, but you'll have to hold the light. Can you do it?"

"I can do it," Mara said grimly, and reached for the burning brand. "But work fast; Alicia's fried chicken is planning to walk out on me."

Peter examined the grass, looked through the bushes, and then slid the body out into the open space under the trees.

It was Jane, all right. She wore a rose-colored sports dress and there was a figured kerchief knotted around her neck. The pale, scarlet-nailed hands were still adorned with the jewelry George Fawcett had described. Peter sat back on his heels, whistling tunelessly.

"She's terribly attractive," Mara said in a subdued voice. "Her face looks—I don't know—sort of defenseless, doesn't it? Why did she have to die, Peter?"

"She died because somebody stood to gain, or because someone hated her, or because she got between her murderer and something he wanted," he answered shortly. "Those are the usual reasons, aren't they?"

"She doesn't look like the sort of person who gets murdered."

"Looks have nothing to do with it. Mara, do women wear handkerchiefs knotted around their necks that way?"

After a minute Mara said, "Not any more. It was high style once, but that was ages ago."

"How long?"

"Before my time."

With infinite caution Peter untied the handkerchief, and as Jane Titus's neck came to view the burning torch wavered and sagged. "Watch it!" Peter ordered. "This girl was strangled."

"Obviously." Mara gave a weak and slightly teary laugh. "And her head's crooked, as though—as though—"

"As though her neck were broken. It is. All right, we can't do anything for her now." He carried the body into the bushes and covered it up. "We'll use the torch for a little way," he decided, "and then douse it."

Once back in the car, there didn't seem to be anything to say. Peter offered Mara a bottle of bourbon, and after she had drunk he let a long drink roll down his own throat. It dimmed, a little, the memory of Jane's discolored throat and the long white hands. Mysteries, Peter thought sourly, had a way of backfiring.

"So what do we do now?" he asked. "Tell the *pro*-Yorks or go directly to the police?"

"Peter," Mara said, "do you really think anyone saw our fire?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Well, suppose the murderer is watching this spot," she suggested craftily. "If we seem to drive away he'll come to investigate, won't he?"

Peter leaned over and kissed her tenderly. "You are a very bright little girl," he said kindly. "You have brains in your head. Let's give it a try, at least."

Peter stepped on the ignition and the car rolled onto the highway. A little later he pulled off into a side lane.

The clock on the dash ticked noisily. Twelve-thirty. One o'clock. Mara yawned sleepily and leaned against Peter's shoulder. One-thirty. One-forty.

Peter shook her gently. "Wake up, pet, we drew a blank."

"I wasn't asleep," Mara said distinctly. "I was thinking. Peter, we can't leave Jane out there like that. I guess we better take her back to town."

"Help! Body snatchers now! Listen, Mara, all we have to do is notify the police and they'll go out and get her."

"If these people wanted the police," Mara reminded him, "they would have gone there when Jane disappeared. I want Jane," she said stubbornly.

He shook his head sadly.

"Darling," he said gently, "it isn't *right*."

"Right!" she scoffed. "You and your right and wrong. Right is how you feel inside of yourself. I'll feel *right* if we take care of poor Jane and I'll feel *wrong* if we leave her there in the bushes. Besides," she added, with her own brand of logic, "*now* we know what we're looking for. Not an errant wife, but a murderer."

"What do you plan to do with her after you get her?"

"I haven't gotten that far. Let's get her first."

PETER switched off the lights a hundred feet before he reached the pepper tree and slid quietly into the shadows. There was no sign of any other car and no sound except the gentle tinkle of a bell on some boat riding in the bay. Nearer at hand a bird chirped sleepily.

"Now that we're back here, what, exactly, do you propose to do?" Peter asked.

"Put Jane in the rumble seat. I thought of that on the way back."

"We can't carry Jane around in the car, Mara," he said reasonably. "This is hot weather."

"Then we'll have to catch the murderer quickly," Mara remarked stonily. "After all, it's probably Jim York; all we have to do is prove it."

"That's all. And why is it Jim York?"

"Anyone who writes such tripe is capable of anything."

"Very likely. But in any event, it's nothing we can prove in a day," Peter insisted. "And I'm not going to cart a corpse around. Not even a pretty one."

"Then we'll bury her," Mara said brightly. "You still have that shovel we had to buy when you were determined to find that cutoff to Twenty Nine Palms. We'll dig a nice deep grave where no one can find her."

"Including ourselves, probably." Still, it was better than the rumble seat. Peter climbed wearily from the car. "I'll do it alone. If anyone comes, blow the horn hard and *drive on*. I'll go north along the beach and you can pick me up where the public beach begins."

Peter was very tired of climbing barbed-wire fences. Peter was very tired, period. Encumbered by the spade, he nicked his ankle and felt blood trickling warmly along his shoe top. Something to confuse the police, he thought dryly, when they caught up with him. Peter tucked his handkerchief inside of his sock and hobbled forward.

Eventually he reached the thicket where Jane was hidden and came into unexpected and shocking contact with her cold face. Swallowing a wave of nausea, Peter slid his arms under her and lifted the body into the clearing.

Lighting a torch now was out of the question. What had to be done must be done in the dark with a minimum of noise. The moon, he observed, had come out



from behind the clouds and showed every indication of co-operating. He left Jane and began looking for a suitable location. Far enough from the edge to escape notice; not too far to locate later. Peter found a curiously stunted pine which served as an identifying mark and began shoveling. Despite the sweat dripping into his eyes, his back was cold with fear. The sound of the spade was a dull pounding at his nerves, and his ears strained for the one short fearful bleating of the car horn which never came. Birds twittered, waves lapped gently, and Jane lay quietly.

Thirty minutes and the trench was only a few inches deep. Clouds scudded over the moon and wiped out Peter's work. With a sigh he sat down and cupped his hands around a cigarette. Nothing to do but wait for light. He wondered if Mara was watching the sky.

Sitting still was worse than digging. Every snapping twig, every shadow, was the murderer creeping up, a length of strong rope held in his smooth white hands. Peter grinned and rubbed his face. Mark had the smooth white hands and Mark wasn't the murderer. Mark was the man who had written the best book on the Continental Roots of the Comedy of Manners in the Restoration Drama. Peter yawned cavernously and watched the moon sail out into the clear night sky.

PICKING up his shovel, he walked back to the crude shallow grave. Viciously he struck the spade into the earth again and heard it grit against a tree root. That was all it needed. Dropping to his knees, he explored the cold ground with cramping fingers only to discover that the root was thick, tough, and deeply imbedded. To the accompaniment of a fine selection of Elizabethan oaths he tore it loose and resumed his digging. Five minutes later he struck another, thicker, tougher, and immovable.

Peter straightened painfully and fixed Jane's body with a malevolent stare. In the pale light she looked serene and untroubled. She could afford to: she didn't have to dig a grave. No one had talked her into concealing a body.

The shovel fell from Peter's hand. What am I doing? he thought wildly. If I bury Jane I'm an accessory after the fact! Headlines danced before his tired eyes.

## PROMINENT PEDAGOGUE PROTESTS PARTICIPATION IN PLOT

And a picture of Mara, captioned:

## CAMPUS CUTIE CACHES CORPSE

Un-uhn! Resolutely Peter scraped the earth back into the hole, leveled it, tamped it down, and covered it with hastily transplanted shrubs. Meticulously he collected cigarette butts and matches, returned Jane's body to the exact spot from which he had taken it, and shouldered his spade. It was then that he heard the noise.

It was not a loud sound: a cracking twig, maybe, or the rustling of leaves. Peter lifted the shovel above his head and waited.

A little to the right a branch waved. "Peter," Mara whispered. "Where are you, Peter?" Her voice sounded small and lonely.

Peter lowered his bludgeon and sighed. "Dimwit," he said bitterly. "I might have split your skull open. By accident, of course."

"Of course."

"Of course. Why didn't you stay in the car?"

"You took too long." Mara looked around her and nodded approvingly. "Nice work, darling," she commended. "Hardly anyone would know where you'd buried her." She pointed to the scraggly plants. "Those will be wilted in no time. We'd better use rock."

"Damn your cunning!"

"I'm smart. Help me bring up that log."

"But, Mara—"

"But me no buts." She waved airily and set off toward the edge of the bank. "We'll use some driftwood too."

It was necessary that no raw strip of earth reveal the gross mistake he had almost made, and there was plenty of time in which to tell Mara that Jane was not buried under the dwarfed pine tree. With a secret smile Peter helped her to replace the limp shrubs with half a dozen rocks and a gnarled and worm-eaten log.

"There!" Mara stood back and admired the effect. "That's much better. Do you think that does it, or should be bring up one more log?"

"It's fine just the way it is. I haven't

strength enough left to lift a bottle to my lips," Peter groaned, and added honestly, "or at least not strength enough to do more than that. Come on, I'm pooped."

## VII

IT WAS NICE DRIVING along the deserted road. Mara's head lay warm against Peter's bare shoulder, the bourbon glowed in his stomach, he had the comforting knowledge that he had avoided a serious blunder, and the road stretched empty before him. Peter gunned the motor, liking the power of the big car and its quick responsiveness.

Two or three miles had slid beneath the tires when he felt Mara stiffen in the circle of his arm. "Peter!" Her voice was scared. "Peter, your shirt!"

"I'm right in style." He looked down with affection at his well-burned chest and arms.

"Stop, you idiot!" Mara stamped impatiently on the floor boards. "Your shirt is back there with Jane!"

"Oh Lord." The car idled to a stop.

"I was carrying it when I fell over her," Mara explained. "I dropped it right where she was hidden. We'll have to go back, Peter."

"I'd rather be hung for murder," Peter answered grimly, "than to climb that fence again."

"Don't be stubborn, darling. If you won't go in for it, I will. And in California you don't hang."

Peter sighed and turned the car around. "Remind me to bring a towel the next time," he grumbled.

Twenty minutes later they were headed again toward the town: tired, tattered, and a little drunk.

When they came to the intersection of Cyprus and the coast road Peter swung the car off to the right and pulled up in front of the City Hall. Mara stirred sleepily and blinked at the round white light globe with POLICE painted on it.

"Peter!" she said sharply. "Why are you stopping here?"

Peter Ponsonby turned off the ignition and slumped behind the wheel. "I didn't bury Jane's body," he said soberly. "It's all right to stick our necks out, but not too far, Mara."

"You can't tell the police!" she hissed furiously. "Think of the Graysons! Think of all the *pro-Yorks*! You're working for them, Peter!"

Peter grinned ruefully and touched her cheek in a quick caress. "I'm working for justice, honey. And right now I'm going to take a long shot on a man I've never seen."

Mara's eyes were wide and still as she searched his face. "Dope," she said finally. "Darling, unbelievable, lovable *dope*! All right, let's go."

Mara, Peter thought complacently, was a very satisfactory woman. He reached across her to open the car door and followed her up the steps.

A bored desk sergeant looked up from a copy of *Detective Book Magazine*. "Want something?" he asked indifferently.

"I'd like to speak to the chief of police."

The sergeant looked at the clock meaningfully. "It's a little late," he observed. It was three-thirty. "You're nine hours late, as a matter of fact; or five hours early, whichever way you want to put it."

"He's expecting us," Peter lied glibly. "What's his home address?"

"Sixteen fourteen Oak. One block south and a mile east." The sergeant looked at Peter's bare breast and shook his head sadly. "Amos ain't going to like this."

Peter held up his first and second fingers, pressing them tight together. "Amos and I," he said, "are like *this*. Thanks a lot."

SIXTEEN FOURTEEN Oak was a small cottage with a neat picket fence. It was very dark. Peter rang the bell and waited. After a little a light went on somewhere in the back of the house, and a minute later a man came along the hall, belting his robe as he walked. Peter liked the look of him: dark-haired, solid, moving with energy and poise. The pocket of the robe sagged ominously.

"Who is it?" Schroeder's voice was unexpectedly soft and gentle, but he looked like a cop.

"A friend of Alicia Grayson."

The door opened, but not far.

"Anything wrong?"

"Quite a lot, but it's nothing I care to discuss through a crack. For heaven's sake, man, open the door!"

The two men faced each other.

"I'm Peter Ponsonby and this is my fiancée, Miss Mallory," Peter explained. "We're week-end guests of the Graysons."

"Of course. Come in." Schroeder moved ahead of them, turning on lights in the living room. "Ken teaches for you, doesn't he? And you write murder mysteries. Good ones. Cigarette?" The police chief waved them into chairs and passed a box of cigarettes. "I hope nothing has happened to Allie or Ken?"

"No. Miss Mallory and I stumbled onto the dead body of a young woman near here and we wanted to report it." Peter's eyes were candid and untroubled behind his spectacles.

Schroeder glanced at his wrist watch. "Who was it?"

Peter permitted himself a small chuckle. "How on earth should we know?" he shrugged.

"We're strangers here," Mara added helpfully.

"I see." Schroeder smoked toward the ceiling. "Where did you find her?"

"South of town. On a point of land that juts out into the bay."

"That's private property. It's fenced off from the highway."

Peter eased his torn ankle. "I know; trespassing and all that sort of thing," he admitted virtuously.

Mara gave Schroeder her dazzling smile. "It was my fault, really," she offered. "I thought there would be a marvelous view, but of course it isn't high enough."

"No, it isn't. Who was the woman you found?"

Peter's brows shot up in surprise. "We told you we didn't know."

"I heard you. Was it Jane Titus?"

The silence lay between them cold as a cake of ice. Over it Peter Ponsonby and Amos Schroeder measured each other. Suddenly the English professor grinned. "I think so."

Amos sighed and shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said soberly. "I liked Jane. But there it is," he shrugged. "It was bound to happen."

Mara did a quick double-take. "Why do you say that?"

Schroeder gave her an enigmatic smile and did not answer. Instead he turned to Peter. "I suppose they have asked you to find Jane and have said that the police must

be kept in ignorance of her disappearance?" he asked.

A blush of titanic proportions spread over Ponsonby's face and chest until his red hair was no longer red but only part of the total scheme. Lies were puny things in the presence of such omniscience. "Something like that," he nodded.

Schroeder considered his fingernails. "That whole York crowd," he lamented, "is scared to death of me. Actually, I'd like to help them if I could." He permitted a wintery twinkle to show in his cold blue eyes. "Do you want to play both ends against the middle, Professor?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I have authority," Schroeder drawled, "but it doesn't get me anywhere. You have the confidence of the college crowd, and I think if we pool our resources we can lick this thing."

"What—thing?" Mara asked.

"Murder, Miss Mallory. By the way, how was Jane killed?"

Peter shook his head. "She's been strangled. Her neck is broken."

"So?" Schroeder gave the information his professional attention. "Not the technique I would have expected, but then," he added modestly, "I'm no great shakes at this crime business."

Mara was suddenly very alert. She leaned forward and fixed the robe-clad officer with an accusing eye. "Who mentioned murder?" she said accusingly. "Why not death by accident?"

"Jane was murdered."

"Do you know who did it?" she demanded bluntly.

AMOS Schroeder smiled secretly. "If I do, it is nothing I could prove. That's where you and the professor come in." He made a church steeple of his fingers and returned to his contemplation of the ceiling. "I'd be real pleased to have you two carry on," he murmured, "and it might make it easier if you knew the police were there to help you if you ever need it. I wouldn't go to first base with the college people. I guess my methods are too crude for them."

"You mean," Peter asked, "that we're to go right ahead as though we'd never found Jane's body? Keep on investigating until we know who did it?"

Schroeder nodded amiably. "That's right. Use your own judgment, but get me some *proof*. Theories are a dime a dozen, Dr. Ponsonby. Just pretend you never found Jane and never came here in the middle of the night to report it. Go right ahead like you planned. But get *proof*," he repeated. "Something that'll stand up in court. Something," he smiled, "like a signed confession."

SOMEONE'S UP," Peter observed unnecessarily as they pulled in front of the Grayson's house later.

"I hope Candy is all right. Peter," Mara whispered, "what are we going to tell them?"

"Why should we tell them anything?" Peter asked grumpily. "They haven't shown any desire to discuss it with us."

"But Ken isn't a murderer, Peter, he's one of your own faculty members! And he knows these people; he could help you."

The reception committee was larger than they had anticipated. Ken lay in the swing nursing a highball glass; Alicia, George, and Helen Herrick sat about in varying degrees of undress.

"Where the devil have you two been all night?" Ken demanded.

"Did you hear us leave?" Peter leaned tiredly against the pillar and wiped his face.

"No, but Allie noticed the car was gone when she put up her shades, and we concluded you'd gone off on some junket of your own."

"Georgianna and I came over when we saw the lights burning," Helen offered. "We thought there might be some news of Jane."

George smoked quietly and said nothing.

"Where were you?" Ken repeated.

"I was too tired to sleep," Peter shrugged, "so I routed Mara out of her downy and we took a drive along the coast. Several miles out of town I had to change a tire. Dirty work." He brushed his knees and sent up a cloud of dust.

The reception committee digested this information in silence, and then George said, "Well, if that's all there is to hear, I'm going home to bed. I can't remember when I was ever so tired. Coming Helen?"

"What? Oh yes, of course." Helen touched the shining copper helmet of her hair, smoothed down the skirt of her severely tailored black robe, and rose with a sigh. "It's very late," she said vaguely. "In a way I'm glad there wasn't any news of Jane. Good night, all."

The two women separated in front of George's house, two doors slammed, and presently lights winked off on both sides of the street.

"Dear Helen," Alicia said fondly. "She's the most loyal friend a person ever had."

"George is too," her brother pointed out.

"Of course, but that's different."

"Why doesn't Helen like George?" Mara asked unexpectedly.

"Oh, that," Alicia chuckled. "It doesn't mean anything. Helen hates being single and she's inclined to be catty with her married friends. I'm the only one she's always sweet to," she added proudly, and then yawned aloud. "Goodness!" she apologized. "I really must get to bed. I'm too old for hours like this."

Ken lingered after his sister had left. "You guys had a couple of hundred miles of driving today," he said finally, "so I don't take much stock in that midnight-ride story."

"And I don't take much stock in your story about Alicia finding the car gone when she put up her shades," Peter retorted. "Allie's room is on the back of the house, as I recall. Why were you looking for me? What did you want?"

"Dick Tracy in the flesh," Ken said with unnecessary sarcasm. "All right, I went to your room about a quarter after eleven because I had come to the conclusion that I'd better discuss Jane's disappearance with you. When I found the room empty, I got Allie up to check on Mara."

"Such delicacy!" Mara murmured sarcastically.

"Then the two of us came downstairs and thrashed it all out again," Ken sighed. "After a bit the girls came over to see what was wrong, and Allie and I discovered that George had already put you to work on solving our local mystery. After that we decided to wait up and see what you learned."

"Weren't you a little tardy about joining up?" Peter asked, lighting a cigarette.

"I didn't want to spoil your week end," Ken said lamely.

"That wasn't your reason, my midget friend." Peter's bright stare was hard and uncompromising. "You were hell-bent on keeping me out of this. You still are, but you know George has talked it over with me and you've decided to string along with us." He kept his hands cupped around the flame of the match so that Ken could see his face. "We found Jane."

"Where?"

"Out on that wooded promontory south of town. She was dead. Strangled."

Ken's glass tinkled to the floor, and Peter regretfully watched the highball spread along the boards.

"Let's go into the house," Ken said dully. "I think I need bright lights and a strong drink."

WITH hands that were unsteady Ken Grayson took ice and soda water from the refrigerator and put them on a tray with a bottle of bourbon and three glasses. He lighted a cigarette, forgetting the one that smoked on the sink.

"Suppose you tell me now what you know about this business," Peter suggested when they were seated around the table.

"That won't take long," Ken shrugged. "I know practically nothing."

"Oh, fine! Did you know Jane?"

"Sure. We're the same age and I've seen her off and on ever since we were in grammar school."

"What sort of person was she?"

"Do you want a terse Anglo-Saxon term which covers it nicely, or something longer?"

"Something longer, please."

"Jane was an overgrown brat," Ken said evenly. "She was spoiled and snobbish as a youngster, and she never outgrew it. She was in school here some of the time, but she couldn't make friends and so her mother sent her away for high school and college. After that Jane traveled around—a sort of itinerant house guest—for a couple of years, and then Blanche York picked out Clive Titus for her. She gave them their home and her blessing and called it a day. The marriage didn't work, of course," he shrugged. "Clive is an intellectual giant and Jane is—was—as bird-brained as they come. As soon as Blanche

died Jane went back to her nomadic existence and Clive settled down to his work again. Outside of sharing the same roof, I don't think there has been anything between them for a couple of years. So help me God, that's all I can contribute."

"Can or will?" Peter asked.

"Can." Ken turned restlessly and lighted one cigarette from the butt of the other. "These people are Allie's whole life," he explained. "Like most single women, she takes her friendships damned seriously. I can't step in, Pete, and repeat a lot of confidences and conjectures in order to help you account for the death of a stupid and self-centered young woman."

"It's not our job to establish Jane's importance as a social unit," Peter said mildly. "We're concerned with apprehending a criminal."

Ken's reply was spontaneous and unacademic. He apologized to Mara for it. "There are no criminals here," he went on, "in the sense you mean the word, Pete. These are all nice people—teachers—our own sort."

"All right, so they're nice people," Peter conceded. "One of them killed Jane Titus just the same. I want to know which one."

"It doesn't have to be one of our crowd," Ken insisted. "It could have been a tramp or a drunken fisherman or—"

"Or an escaped homicidal maniac," Peter finished with heavy irony.

"Well, why not?" Ken said truculently.

"Because the technique was too elaborate. Thieves and maniacs run to blunt instruments; Jane was hung. Besides, the murderer left these on her." Peter spilled the glittering rings and watch onto the cracked oilcloth cover and heard Mara's smothered gasps. "That lets out your tramp, your drunk, and your maniac."

Kenneth Grayson's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "We could conceal these," he said slowly, "and let Amos Schroeder believe robbery was the motive."

He put out his hand but Peter's was quicker.

"We'll consider that possibility after I know who killed Jane and why," Ponsonby said evenly.

Ken shrugged and poured himself another drink. "Have it your own way. But I'm glad you took the stuff, because it gives us an out if we need it."

"You mean it gives you an out," Peter smiled, "if it develops that Jim York murdered his stepdaughter."

"He didn't!" Ken exploded. "He couldn't! Jim's a saint."

"You aren't dry behind the ears yet," Peter scoffed. "Because a man is a good teacher and inspires loyalty and affection he is not necessarily 'a saint.'" He waved Ken back into his chair. "Keep your shirt on," he cautioned. "I'm not saying York is a murderer; just that he could be."

"That's what they said the other time!" Ken shouted. "And it wasn't true! We proved it was nothing but a pack of filthy lies intended to defame a splendid man. That's not going to happen again if I have anything to say about it!"

KEN was very transparent. Peter smiled contentedly and watched a moth bumping against the kitchen light. "So that's it," he nodded dreamily. "Everyone has talked so much about Jim York that I have grown suspicious. What happened?"

"Nothing," Ken insisted. "It was all untrue, every word of it."

"Were you here at the time?"

"No," Grayson admitted. "It occurred after I went to Los Angeles to teach."

Peter smiled agreeably. "All right, let's drop it."

Ken changed his tactics abruptly. "Pete," he begged, "stop trying to find out any more about Jane. We asked you to find her and you did."

"This is just the beginning."

"No, it's the end. Give us the jewelry and tell us where the body is, and we'll handle it from here on in. Nothing you do is going to help Jane."

"I realize that, but I just plain hate people who go around murdering. Murder fills me with a crusader's zeal; I long to be up and doing." He cocked his head and smiled whimsically at Ken Grayson. "But I'll tell you what I will do: I'll tell you everything I know and give you an opportunity to keep this one out of the hands of the police."

From over the rim of her glass Mara did a quick double-take. Ken shrugged and sighed. "That's better than our working at cross-purposes," he said grudgingly. "Shoot."

"Jane had an appointment to meet Mark on the *Sprite* at nine o'clock last night." Peter looked at the clock and grinned. "Friday night, I mean. Mark told Elizabeth that he had a committee meeting, so when Jane called at eight-thirty to say she couldn't keep their date, he left the house anyway, to save face. Apparently he just walked around until nearly eleven. Then he checked on the boat, found it moored as usual, and went home to bed. Mrs. Cready spent an uneventful evening making cookies and what not."

"What was Jane doing that kept her from meeting Mark?" Ken asked intelligently.

"Nothing. She did meet him. At least, she went to the boat at nine."

"You mean Mark is—"

"No," Mara cut in. "Jane probably didn't make the phone call. Her murderer made it."

"That's the only way it makes sense," Peter added. "All we have to do now is find out who *knew* Jane was meeting Mark on the boat at nine o'clock."

There was a long pause while Ken digested this information. Beyond the screen of the kitchen window a bird chattered crossly and somewhere farther away a tomcat was courting. Mara spread peanut butter on a graham cracker and crunched contentedly.

"How did you know Jane went to the boat?" Ken asked finally.

"She spoke to that malodorous old goat who sits out on the end of the pier," replied Peter.

"The Mariner. A local character and proud of it. Was Jane alone?"

"He's not telling us. Not yet. He went all sly and evasive when I questioned him."

"The Mariner," Mara said darkly, "is not telling all he knows."

"We'll get the rest out of him tomorrow night," Peter promised. "Or Mara will. She handled him beautifully."

"Thanks for the plug, lug."

"Anyway," Peter continued, "alone or otherwise, Jane went south about nine-fifteen. Since Mark saw the boat safely moored at eleven, we can assume she died between nine and eleven."

"You found her—strangled—on the Tor?" Ken asked fearfully.

"The Tor?" Peter questioned. "Is that

what you call that wooded point? We found her there, anyway. She had been hung and cut down. The body is hidden in the underbrush."

"What led you to that particular point?"

"Elementary," Peter replied. "After we knew the boat had been gone from nine until eleven we drove south along the coast, and that is the only possible place for what happened."

"How did you find her?"

"He didn't," Mara said sleepily. "I fell over her."

**K**EN tapped down a cigarette thoughtfully and scowled at Peter. "She couldn't have been hung there," he said finally. "That was one of the places that we searched this morning."

"Did you think she might be camping out?" Peter inquired coldly.

Ken had the grace to blush. "There were four of us looking," he muttered. "We couldn't have missed her."

"Are you suggesting that she was taken there afterward? And if so, where was she hung? Not out on the water."

Ken shook his head and sighed. "I don't know how it was done, Pete. I only know she wasn't there this morning."

"Who was searching?"

"Alicia, Helen, Clive, and I."

"You still don't want to take this to the police?" Peter asked.

"Absolutely not." Inspiration lighted Ken's pale eyes. "Say, Pete, do you think we could dispose of the body? Permanently, I mean?"

Ponsonby considered the question gravely. "I thought you were afraid of an unexplained disappearance," he said mildly.

"We were," Ken admitted, "but it's better than—than murder."

"We could hang her up in a deserted barn and fake a suicide," Mara suggested.

"A really smart cop would see through that one," Peter remarked. "And bodies have a way of not staying put. Who killed her, Ken?" He rapped it out at high speed.

The cigarette fell from Ken's startled fingers. "Now don't start that!" he said crossly. "I don't bully worth a damn and I don't know who killed her."

"Who has a motive?"

"You're the one to answer that," Ken retorted. "Offhand I'd say that if Jane

was in love with Mark, then he or Elizabeth might have done it. Or Clive." He grinned suddenly. "And you might nose around a bit in George's private life," he suggested. "Allie says that Clive Titus admires George more than any woman in the world."

"Is Allie inclined to criticize George because Wallace married her?" Peter shot back.

Ken flushed darkly. "There was nothing between Wallace Fawcett and my sister," he said stiffly, "except the usual college dating. Allie likes George. I was only trying to be funny."

"I see. How many of your crowd can you alibi between nine and eleven on Friday, Ken?"

"Not many. Alicia and I were here all evening, of course, along with a dozen other people. So was George." Ken stopped and frowned at the table. "No," he amended carefully, "George wasn't here all evening. Some of the girls don't drink and Allie had ordered ice cream. She asked George to go for it just before ten."

"That was the first George knew she was to go?"

"Yes. I had meant to, but I was up to my ears in mixing drinks and Allie was afraid the store would close."

"Where is the store?"

"Downtown. On Locust, near the coast road."

"Do you know how long George was gone?"

Ken shook his head. "She left before ten, because that's their closing time, and I recall that the girls were having ice cream and cookies during the eleven o'clock newscast."

"All right," Peter sighed. "That's close enough. How about the others?"

"None of them were at the party."

"Did you wonder about that at the time?" Peter hinted.

"Not especially. Jim told us he had papers to grade, and Helen never shows up if there are more women than men. Clive and Jane have always been unpredictable."

"What about the Creadys?"

"We expected them," Ken nodded, "until Jeanie brought the cookies and said they weren't coming."

"Then," Peter summarized, "we have



Jane going off to keep an appointment at nine o'clock. We find her body on the Tor, and it is apparent that she was hung. Everyone insists that she was virtually a stranger in town except for her father's intimate friends. Of those, only you and Alicia have perfect alibis. Elizabeth Cready and George Fawcett are reasonably well covered and the other four are wide open."

"It looks grim," Ken sighed. "What do we do now?"

"Get some sleep."

Ken's look was a silent rebuke. "Suppose some bright lad discovers Jane's body while you are all grossly snoring?" he asked.

"I don't snore, and it is highly unlikely that anyone will find Jane. If anyone should, however, we will all act as surprised as hell."

"Word will get around that Jane is missing," Ken predicted glumly. "People will start talking."

"In that case, why don't you circulate a story that she's staying with friends somewhere?"

Ken grinned self-consciously. "We never thought of that," he admitted. "It's so darned simple it never occurred to us."

"I'm fine at really simple things," Peter yawned. "Do you close this window?"

"No, and it's so near morning I'll leave the back door open too. Gee, I'm tired!" Ken yawned with the healthy abandonment of youth.

"We all are. Thanks for everything, Ken, and keep this under your hat for the present."

"You mean I can't discuss it with Al-lie?" Ken's loyalties struggled briefly. "O.K."

Peter turned to where Mara drooped over the peanut butter, looking unbelievably sad. "What's the matter, punk?" he asked.

"I was thinking about Jane." She drew a tremulous sigh. "So young to die."

"Young," Peter answered bluntly, "and dead. Can you get upstairs or must I carry you?"

"I'll walk." Mara rose and sat down again. "My foot's asleep." She stamped it twice to prove her point and then drifted sleepily toward the stairs.

On the upper landing Peter kissed her tenderly. "You're asleep from the neck

both ways," he smiled. "You take my room and I'll look after Candy."

Ten minutes later he crawled wearily into bed beside the gently purring Candy Too.

My wedding night, he thought glumly.

He rubbed his nose in the child's curls and fell asleep immediately.

## VIII

PETER PONSONBY lay on the porch in the happy state between sleep and full consciousness, permitting himself the luxury of undirected thinking. Bits of the puzzle of Jane Titus's murder appeared before him, like picture montage, without any volition on the professor's part. Occasionally two or three of the fragments interlocked, but for the most part the puzzle parts were unrelated. Certainly there was no discernible pattern yet. Peter sighed, but not sadly. He was a patient man.

Mara appeared in the doorway looking drowsy and adorable. "It was sweet of you to let me sleep," she yawned. "Where's Candy? And what time is it?"

"It's tenish. There is coffee and fruit juice in the kitchen and coffeecakes in the warming oven. Bring your breakfast out here and let's talk."

She came back in a few minutes and sat tailor-fashion on the floor beside him, balancing a tray on her knees. "Where's Candy?" she repeated.

"Over at Miss Herrick's," Peter told her. "Helen came over about an hour ago to learn what was new. It was the first time she had seen your small niece and she went into a perfect tizzy over her."

"Typical old maid. Like me," Mara smiled.

"You can change your status any time you want to," Peter commented. "Apparently Miss Herrick can't."

"Where's Alicia?"

"Dressing for church. She's going to make Ken go too."

"What's on the program?" Mara inquired.

"Let's see George Fawcett first," Peter said. "She can fill in the background on York."

"Ken could do that."

"Sure, but it would be loused up with his prejudices and loyalties. George will

give it to us without the trimmings. Which reminds me," he grinned, "to ask how you knew that Helen Herrick didn't like George?"

"She calls her Georgianna and George hates that. Element'ry, my dear Watson. And while we're playing guessing games," Mara retorted, "why didn't the others find Jane's body yesterday when they searched the Tor?"

Peter moved into the shade of the honeysuckle and busied himself with his pipe. "I think they did," he said mildly. "At least they *could* have; they were agitated enough."

"Maybe," Mara said skeptically, "but it sounds thin. How about the body having been put there after they searched?"

"She was hung from those trees, I think."

"Perhaps she was up *in* the tree," Mara suggested brightly. "Maybe the murderer suggested until dark to cut her down."

"You *ghoul*. I'm not sure that I want to marry you after all. Hurry up and get dressed and let's see George. After that we'll go out to the Tor and see how Jane was killed. I hope they've picked her up."

"In the cold light of day," Mara said soberly. "I begin to think we should have left the whole business alone, Peter. Never gone to Amos with it, I mean. If the murderer goes back and finds she's gone—"

"Scared?"

"Of course not! I only shake this way for exercise." Mara shivered and drank the scalding coffee. "And speaking of Amos, how are you going to explain the missing jewelry?"

Ponsonby grinned ruefully. "It was the only service I could render the *pro*-Yorks," he admitted. "As Ken observed, they can fall back on the robbery motive." He shifted his weight on the squeaky swing and scowled. "Who's your candidate for the hot seat?"

"Still Jim York. And in California it's a lethal chamber."

"What motive?"

"That, my dear Holmes, is what *you* will establish." Mara leaned down and kissed him warmly. "I love you." She blew the ashes off his chest and took the cigarettes from his pocket. "I'll be down in fifteen minutes," she promised.

Peter spent a couple of heart-warming minutes thinking about Mara, and had just returned to the problem of Jane Titus when Peggy Ann's bright little face appeared at the top of the steps.

"Good morning!" she caroled. "I'd like to talk to you about your shirt."

FOR one sick moment Peter remembered the sodden thing he had recovered from under the bushes, and then he saw that Peggy Ann was waving a crisp type-written sheet at him.

He smiled feebly. "A new survey?"

"Yes; I've carried the toothpaste as far as I can, so now I'm going into men's shirts. This is only a preliminary test, of course, and I'll have to ask it to you all over again in a couple of days."

"Better make it tomorrow, because we'll be shoving off soon." Peter lay back in the swing and lighted a cigarette. "Fire away."

"What brand of shirt did you purchase last?" Peggy Ann asked in her curiously uninteresting professional voice.

"Arrow."

"How long ago did you purchase it?"

"In the spring. April, I think."

"Did you buy more than one shirt at that time?"

"Yes. Three."

The interview went on to its inevitable conclusion while one part of Peter's active mind continued to worry at the murder of Jane Titus. When Peggy Ann had finished he said, "You've been on this study quite a while, haven't you?"

"Since last September," she nodded.

"Covered a good many items in that time, I imagine." His remarks were prompted by some vague and undefined need to know more about the town's problem child.

"Oh my, yes! Toothpaste, hand lotion, children's underwear, shoes, nail lacquer, breakfast foods, women's dresses—"

Something turned over in Peter's mind. "I notice," he interrupted, "that you classify your interviews by economic groups. What does it mean, for example, when Miss Mallory says she is Class C?"

"Middle class. Not plushy and not poor. Which reminds me," she dimpled, "that I didn't get your rating, or your age or address."

Peter told her his income and watched

her encircle the A with justifiable pride.

"These classifications vary from one survey outfit to another," Peggy Ann confided. "It's another of the things that should be standardized. For instance, when I say that a family is Class A, I mean they have an income of five thousand a year or better, a home with two or more baths, at least two cars, and a full-time maid."

"In a community like this you can't have many Class-A homes, can you?" Peter asked.

"I don't need many." She tossed her head prettily. "Looked at percentage wise, not many families are Class A. See? If I take a sampling of fifty cases I only need a couple of Class As."

Peter smiled at her earnestness. "Even so, you must have to use your Class As over and over."

"I do," she admitted regretfully. "That's one of my handicaps. I have only eleven of them, and three of those are just stinkers to interview."

"Are the Class As all in one neighborhood or scattered?"

"They're all together. I have to walk out by the Country Club every survey for my two As. That way." She pointed over her shoulder toward some indeterminate spot. "Right at the end of the road there is President Freeman; Class A *plus*. Next door, this way, is Professor Todhunter, who married pots of money. Then Professor York, and of course he's only good for part of the time because he's a widower. The Hamiltons and the Merriams are really Class B because they only have women to clean. There are four good Class As across the street, and four more in the block this side. Those are the Tituses and the Bronsons and old Mr. Hamilton and the Smiths."

When she stopped for breath Peter asked, "What is this neighborhood?"

"Oh, mixed up," Peggy Ann shrugged. "Some Bs, but mostly Cs."

Ponsonby stared in open admiration. "What a fascinating vocation," he murmured. "I must try it sometime."

"It requires a very special talent," Peggy Ann said smugly. "I've made over seven thousand interviews and I've never had but one door shut in my face."

"That sounds like an impressive record." Peter ran through the fragments he had picked up. "You said three of your Class As were not co-operative," he reminded her. "Which ones are those?"

"Mrs. Phipps, the banker's wife, and Mrs. Arkush—he owns the Elite Department Store—are just horrid," she lamented, "and old Mr. Hamilton is so deaf you can't ever be sure he knows what you've said to him. The college people are the nicest. They understand your problem."

PETER had his mouth open to ask a highly pertinent question when a hot and dirty Candy Too trudged up the steps. Her small pink socks had worked down into her sandals, a button had come off her pinafore, and grime streaked a sweaty face. She looked altogether happy.

"Hello, darling!" Peggy Ann cooed. "I remember your name; it's Candy Too. Do you know my name?"

"No." Candy's tone suggested that she neither knew nor cared. "Uncle Peter, I want to tinkle."

"Then get your aunt; she's in the kitchen," Peter directed. He was glad the expression was Candy's own: Peggy Ann looked blankly uncomprehending.

"Hello, nuisance." Ken came out and patted Peggy Ann on the head. "What's the gossip this morning?"

"You know I don't gossip, Dr. Grayson." She uncrossed her legs and smoothed down her skirt. "I like to *visit* with people when I make my calls, but I never gossip. Isn't it marvelous," she hurried on, "that Professor Titus heard from his wife? I was just worried to death yesterday when their Margaret told me Mrs. Titus hadn't been home *all night*."

She glanced quickly at each man, but both faces remained pleasantly noncommittal.

"I'm glad he heard," Ken said indifferently. "Where was she?"

"In Del Monte. With friends of hers." Peggy Ann squirmed back into her chair and tipped her small pointed chin at Ken. "All I could think of yesterday," she babbled, "was how *ghastly* it would be if anything happened to Mrs. Titus and poor Professor York had to go through all that criticism again."

Ken's eyes were steely and his answering smile was hacked out of ice. "That's gossip," he said chidingly. "I thought you never gossiped."

"It wasn't gossip when Mrs. York died," she retorted. "Her husband got criticized *plenty*, and you know it. More than half the folks in town thought that—that—well, lots of people thought it all looked mighty funny."

"Really?" Ken managed to sound faintly amused. "What's your survey today, Peg? More toothpaste?"

"No, I'm on men's shirts now. You know, Dr. Grayson," Peggy Ann persisted, "Professor York's a mighty fine man and I admit him, but *most* folks think he shouldn't ever have married Mrs. York. If he'd gone right ahead like everyone thought he would and married Miss Herrick he'd have been just as important in the college and he'd have saved himself an awful lot of trouble. My mother remembers how—"

"If you want me to answer your survey you'll have to get on with it," Ken said shortly. "I'm going to church."

"Oh, you're just trying to change the subject," Peggy Ann tossed her head petulantly. "You and your sister can't stand a *word* of criticism of Professor York, and you're not the only ones."

Having had the last word, she opened her brief case and took out a fresh form filled in the bottom line and began her monotonous questioning.

The chimes in the living room struck the eight notes of the half-hour. Lying in the swing, a cigarette between his lips, Peter Ponsonby pondered Peggy Ann's revelation. It gave substance to Helen Herrick's interest in Jane's disappearance and it threw a new—and unflattering—light on James York.

Peggy Ann finished her survey and zipped up the worn brief case. "Well, thanks a lot, Dr. Grayson." She twitched her short skirt into place and scratched a mosquito bite on her thin brown ankle. "I've got a lot of calls to make, so I'll get along. Sunday," she explained, "is my day for catching the men."

**H**ELLEN HERRICK came up the steps looking cool and attractive in a pale green print and a large white cartwheel

hat. She wore white gloves and carried a prayer book and several letters. "Would you like another subject?"

"No, thanks," Peggy Ann grinned. "This is for men only. Gee, you look simply super, Miss Herrick! That's a new dress, isn't it? Where did you get it?"

"I sent to Roos Brothers for it. You look very pretty yourself, dear." She pushed back the girl's thick mop of uncurled hair and cupped the small chin in her hand. "You have the real kind of beauty," she smiled. "Youth. You'll appreciate it when you're my age."

"You're the youngest person I know," Peggy Ann said generously, putting her arm around Helen's waist and hugging her affectionately. "Well, I have to go now. Oh, say, Miss Herrick, did you know Professor Titus heard from his wife?"

Helen pulled away gently from the encircling arm. "Heard from her?" she repeated quietly. "I don't know what you mean."

"Well, Mrs. Titus didn't sleep at home on Friday night, and yesterday their Margaret told me about it and I kept thinking how dreadful it would be if poor Professor York was to be involved in anything more. You know what I mean. I'd thought probably you'd heard about it and you'd be glad to know that Professor Titus had a telegram this morning and Mrs. Titus is with friends in Del Monte."

Helen shook her head reproachfully. "Peggy Ann, you mustn't gossip, especially about faculty members. It's unworthy of a person of your intelligence. Truly it is."

Peggy Ann flushed and shrugged thin shoulders. "I never repeat things," she protested, "except to you and Alicia and some of the others who've lived here always."

"I'm sure you try not to," Helen smiled. "I'm glad Jane is having a holiday." Helen's tone was a cool dismissal. "Is Alicia ready, Kenneth?"

"I imagine so. Why don't you go up?"

Miss Herrick stepped into the house, her pale green skirt fluttering delicately. After an embarrassed pause Peggy Ann muttered something about work to do and ran down the walk.

"All right, Pete, let's have it." With a

sigh Ken Grayson sat on the railing and lighted a cigarette. "Both barrels, I suppose, from the look in your eye."

Peter grinned and lay back with a contented grunt. "Nothing of the sort. Peggy Ann suggests some interesting possibilities, however. The romance between Jim York and Miss Herrick must have been more important than you indicated."

"Look," Ken said plaintively, "I'm in a hell of a spot. Allie and Helen have been friends for donkey's years, and every time I open my mouth Allie accuses me of being 'disloyal.' Actually, Pete, all I know is that when the lot of them were in college—and for some time after that—Jim was always coupled off with Helen. They were never formally engaged but they had a sort of understanding. Whatever that means."

"Then finally Jim went up to Berkeley for graduate work and Helen took her Master's right here. It was several years before he came back to town, and a year or two later he married Blanche and brought her and her daughter here. He gave Helen an instructorship at the college and and was swell to her in every way, and, personally, I've never thought there was a thing between them but a long-standing friendship."

"Any talk of his marrying her after his wife died?" Peter inquired.

Ken snorted derisively. "If there was, it was strictly between Helen and Alicia," he commented. "Jim has no intention of remarrying."

"Why shouldn't he?" Peter questioned. "He's youngish, virile and well-heeled. At least, I imagine he must be."

"Oh lord, yes. Jim has plenty of money."

"And property?"

"Some. His home, a dandy business block downtown, and some beach property out—"

He broke off as Helen Herrick drifted onto the porch. Mara was right behind her, staring speculatively at the green dress and the large hat.

Alicia pattered out too, looking hot and hurried in spite of her crisp linen suit. "We'll be home about twelve-thirty," she panted. "Lunch will be at one. My, it's hot! Are you ready, Kenneth?"

"He'll catch up with you in a minute," Peter promised. "Have fun."

MARA watched the two women until they had passed through the gate. "Miss Herrick," she remarked, "looks as cool as a lime ice. She has frightfully good clothes sense. What's new?"

Peter smiled maliciously at Ken Grayson. "I've just discovered," he answered, "why Ken was so disturbed when we found Jane's body on the Tor. Her stepfather owns the property. He does, doesn't he, Ken?"

"Yes." Ken spat the word out ungraciously.

"Naturally," Mara nodded. "I've said all along Jim York was the murderer." She flashed Ken a wicked smile and then patted his shoulder affectionately. "Don't sulk, pet," she cautioned. "The fact that Jim owns the land isn't important, because if the meeting was to be made *by boat* there wasn't any choice."

"Thanks," Ken said dryly. "That helps a lot!"

"What happens if you turn north along the beach?" Peter inquired.

"Nothing. There is a scenic drive for several miles and then you run into the cottages from the next town. Mara's right," Ken sighed. "Jim's point of land is the only possible place."

Peter smoked and stared at the sprinkler revolving on the green lawn. He noted absently that the grass needed cutting. "Where did Jim York get his money?" he asked.

"From his wife."

"What did Peggy Ann mean when she spoke of the criticism Jim had received?" Peter probed.

Ken's face flushed. "Nothing," he said fiercely. "It was all a matter of rumor, and no one but a little fool would repeat it."

"What was the rumor?"

"Some people questioned whether or not Mrs. York committed suicide. They implied that—that—"

"That Jim murdered her for her money," Peter finished.

"Yes. But no one believed it," Ken said quickly. "Captain Schroeder said it was suicide, just as we knew it was. Blanche York had been in poor health for years."

Peter tried to visualize a young James York leaving his college sweetheart and marrying a wealthy widow. He tried to visualize him eventually murdering her for

her money. Maybe, even, murdering her daughter, and concealing the body on an isolated headland. The swing squeaked rhythmically as Peter swung back and forth.

After a while he said, "Jim York married money. Jim York benefited by his wife's death. Jane is killed and her body is found on Jim York's land. Do you two lesser brains know how that adds up?"

"Sure," Ken said bitterly. "It makes Jim the murderer."

"Or else," Peter said musingly, "someone is trying very hard to make it look that way."

## IX

CLAD IN A DISREPUTABLE PAIR of denim clamdiggers and a man's shirt, George Fawcett was laboring in her garden. Strident zinnias clashed with snapdragons; lobelia quarreled with larkspur. It was a garden where too much had been planted and everything had grown. George straightened with a sigh and pulled off her gloves.

"I have a green thumb," she said regretfully. "Too damned green! Did you ever see so much stuff?"

"Pull out every other plant," Peter suggested.

"I should, but I haven't the heart. Come around in the shade and I'll bring out some cokes."

They sat under a feathery jacaranda where they caught the breeze from the badminton court. Wood doves called in the trees and the air had a Sunday-morning drowsiness.

"Did the Graysons go to church?" George asked.

"Yes," Mara smiled. "With Helen Her-rick. We're going out too, and we've put Candy in an improvised play pen. You might look over the fence occasionally."

"I'll do better than that," George promised. "I'll bring her over."

"That will solve your gardening problem," Peter grinned.

"Good. Where are you two going?"

"Down to the beach. We had a very enlightening conversation with the Mariner last night. I guess Mark and Jane really are living up to the rumors about them," Peter said casually.

George sighed. "Poor foolish Jane. Are there any new developments?"

A look, swift as a dragonfly, shot between Mara and Peter. Peter shook his head regretfully. "Not many. We discovered that Jane took Mark's boat out Friday night about nine or a little later."

"Alone?" George asked, surprised.

"Maybe; maybe not. The Mariner was evasive about that. Mark tells me the boat was moored as usual when he looked at it about eleven o'clock. I'd give a lot to know where Jane went during that time. And why."

"There isn't any place to go," George said practically. "The boats here are used for fishing or exploring the coast, and one boat trip is just like another. You go out and fish and come back. We've never owned one," she explained, "but we go with friends and it's always the same. Of course if you want to make a day of it and the weather is nice, you can get to the harbor at Mandeville, or even to Small Cove where there is a pier, but in between there's just no place to tie up."

"Driving along the coast," Mara suggested smoothly, "we saw lovely places for picnicking. Don't you ever swim or wade ashore?"

"Occasionally," George said, and stopped with a frown creasing her brow. "I see what you mean," she nodded slowly.

"If you were going in the *Sprite* on such an expedition," Peter said, "and had only a couple of hours at your disposal, where would you put in?"

"We'd go to the Tor. It's a big bluff south of town."

"Jim York's land."

"Yes, Jim owns it. Why?"

"No reason, other than that it seemed about the right distance for the time she had the boat out." Peter shrugged it away as unimportant. "While we're on the subject of the town idol," he smiled, "tell me about the gossip that got around when his wife died."

"That!" George scoffed. "Just a lot of malicious falsehoods."

One of Mara's eyebrows crawled up in amusement.

"Obviously," Peter agreed. "But I'd still like to hear them."

"It was a definite campaign to defame Jim," George said positively. "Blanche

York was a neurotic, disagreeable woman who made life very difficult for everyone the last several years that she lived. Poor Jim came home from the college one afternoon and went up to her bedroom as he always did and there was Blanche on the bed, dead. He called her physician and both of them assumed she had died of natural causes. Her friends were notified and everything was going along in a prosy fashion when some busybody called up Amos Schroeder and suggested an autopsy.

"THEY performed one and discovered that Blanche had died of cyanide. The maid admitted she had found an empty vitamin bottle under the bed but thought nothing of it. The bottle was recovered and sent to a laboratory where they found that it had contained cyanide. The prints on the bottle — quite naturally — were Blanche's, Jim's, and the maid's. Amos subjected everyone to a great deal of unpleasant questioning and finally decided Blanche had committed suicide."

"Do they know who phoned the police?" Peter asked sharply.

"Of course not." George tossed her head indignantly. "It was anonymous, as those things always are."

"Had Blanche ever threatened to commit suicide?"

"Often. She was ill and unhappy, and it was quite in character for her to do it."

"Leave any notes?"

"No, nothing."

"I see." Peter ground out his cigarette in an abalone shell. "Is it true," he asked, "that Jim York is a saint?"

George chuckled in appreciation. "Hardly. You've been listening to Kenneth, I imagine. No," she smiled. "Jim's no saint, but he's a very fine man. He's a brilliant teacher and a wonderful inspiration to his pupils, they tell me. And I know for a fact that he's kind and generous and honest."

"That," Peter grinned, "is the idol from the ankles up. Let's pull off the ivy and take a look at his feet now."

"They're clay, as I told you before," George sighed. "Jim loves *things*. He'd trade his mother for a really good first folio, and he's hard as tacks about money. That, of course, is what motivated his murder of Blanche, according to the gos-

sips. I'm sure he doesn't love money that well."

"What are his other faults?"

George shrugged. "He's vain," she admitted. "And too easygoing. He likes his comfort, and I expect his emotions are on the shallow side, but then we all have some shortcomings."

"We do indeed. Did Jim and Jane share Mrs. York's estate equally?"

George frowned thoughtfully and shook her head. "I don't know, Peter. Neither of them ever went into details about the will."

"What do you think happened to Blanche York?" Mara asked.

"I think she committed suicide," George answered. "I never for one instant thought that anyone killed her. Who would want to," she asked, "except the two who benefited?"

"No one else with a motive?" Peter quizzed. "How about Helen Herrick?"

"Oh, Peter!" George protested. "You aren't serious, surely? Jim made his choice twenty years ago, and if Helen cared one way or the other she's certainly never shown it. I'm not especially fond of Helen," George admitted frankly, "because spinsterhood has warped her, but I'm certain there has never been anything between Helen and Jim but friendship. I know for a fact that he kept her on the faculty although President Freeman objected to her academic status, and she was always at the Yorks' house when Blanche was alive."

"You don't think she could have killed Blanche hoping Jim would marry her if he was free?"

"No."

"Well, thanks a lot." Peter rose and dumped the cigarette butts into the barbecue pit. "You've filled in some of the gaps. We'll get on with our search now."

"And I'll go and get Candy," George smiled. "The garden needs thinning."

WALKING with deliberate aimlessness, Peter and Mara passed the holiday bathers, rounded the headland, and scrambled up the bank on the far side.

"It doesn't look so bad in daylight," Mara said bravely. "Here is where I found her. Why was she hung, Peter?"

"Now don't start that."



"No, darling, I mean—why was she *hung*? Why didn't York just go ahead and bash her brains in? He couldn't be so chicken if he hit her once."

"Jim York probably isn't the murderer," Peter explained patiently. "And we don't know that he struck her at all. And besides he's a poet; maybe he goes all upchucky at the sight of blood. Hanging is a tidy method. It had to be one of these three trees." Peter walked around them with his head thrown back, like a movie rube looking at the Empire State Building. "There's a good convenient branch," he pointed out, "that low, thick one. I'm going up and take a look at it."

Mara sat on the ground and lit a cigarette. "He went to an awful lot of work," she persisted. "He could have used a knife or poison, or strangled her with that scarf, or—"

"Sweetheart," Peter reminded her, "Jane was *hung*. Remember? It's over and done with now, and there's no point in criticizing the murderer's technique. Her throat is evidence of the way in which she died."

"Sure, sure, may her soul rest in peace. All I was trying to say was that *if* he killed her here he wouldn't have hung her." Mara smiled smugly at her own reasonableness.

"So he was helping her up the bank and accidentally broke her neck," Peter said irritably. He pulled off his coat and tie and made a running leap at the lowest bough. He missed and crashed into the underbrush.

"Eagle scout," Mara sneered.

The second attempt was more successful. Peter caught the limb and swung his body up with an ease and grace which secretly pleased him. He looked down to see if Mara had witnessed his ascent, but she was staring at the sea with a preoccupied air. Grumbling discontentedly, Peter climbed out to the most obvious branch and inspected it carefully. It was dusty and unscarred. With simian agility he went from limb to limb and in every case encountered cobwebs, pine needles, and the accumulated dirt of the long dry summer.

As he dropped to the ground Mara inquired politely, "Having fun?"

"There are still two other trees," he answered stiffly.

The other trees were also free of marks. At the end of thirty minutes Peter came back to where Mara sat and threw himself down beside her. He was hot, tired and disappointed.

"Jane wasn't hung here," he sighed. "There goes my artful reconstruction of the crime."

Mara picked pine needles from his hair and kissed him tenderly. "I've been thinking," she admitted. "Let's go down and see Amos. And Jane, if he'll let us."

"For why?"

"For satisfying my curiosity, you illiterate goon. Maybe I have a valuable hunch."

"Schroeder didn't say anything about us contacting him," Peter said doubtfully. "What's your hunch?"

"I should tell all I know." Mara rose and tossed her pretty head. "Let me phone him, at least."

THEY stopped near the police station and Mara went into a pay booth. When she came out she was smiling like the Cheshire cat. "I think Amos admires me," she said modestly. "He thinks I'm smart."

"Snap judgment. What did you ask him?"

"Look, darling, we've been working on the assumption that Jane went out to the Tor to *meet* someone."

"We have to assume something."

"No, we don't. Not that, anyway. Jane wouldn't go out here to meet her father, would she? Or her husband? And it sounds pretty silly to think she would make a tryst with one of the girls. So that leaves Mark and Ken."

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Peter said in disgust. "Surely you aren't suspecting Ken!"

"No, I'm not. Nor Mark. So maybe she didn't go to meet anyone. That's what I got to thinking while you were playing Tarzan back there."

"So, my dear Watson..."

"So, my dear Holmes, I wanted to know the state of Jane's clothing. It was dry, Amos said, except for the shoes and the back of her skirt. In short, my dumb darling, Jane was carried ashore."

"Dead on delivery," Peter mused. "It kind of changes the picture, doesn't it?"

"Not much. It simplifies it, really. Now we can start and work back from that point. And we can look for wet clothing. The murderer must have—"

Peter shook his head. "There needn't be any wet clothes. If I were the murderer—"

"Heaven forfend!"

"—I would wear my bathing trunks under my trousers. After I got the boat to the Tor I'd shed my pants and carry Jane ashore. When I had concealed the body I'd get back into the boat, put on my clothes, and go back to the pier. A pair of damp bathing trunks would never occasion any comment."

"You're probably smarter than most murderers," Mara said admiringly. "Now let's see the boat."

IN DAYLIGHT they found the *Sprite* easily, an eighteen-foot boat snugly moored fore and aft by hawsers running from eyebolts to pilings. A fender protected the side. Altogether the job looked very inviting: sleek, graceful, expensive. A tenuous fog was coming in and the pier was almost deserted. Peter leaned over the side rail and studied the boat thoughtfully, grateful for the unexpected thinning of the Sunday crowds.

"Cute arrangement," Mara observed.

"Um-hmn." There was a gate which fastened with a trick lock, a gate leading to a long ladder nailed to the pilings and going down to within a foot or two of the gently lapping waves. The ladder had a central support with crude crossbars extending eight or nine inches to either side. The steps, Peter noticed, were far apart; farther than the rungs of an ordinary ladder. It was, he decided, a treacherous means of descent.

"Isn't that heavy mooring for such still water?" Mara asked.

"Boats are expensive," Peter reminded her. "It pays to moor them properly." He snapped a cigarette into the water and sighed. "Not much doubt now as to how Jane was killed, is there?"

"No," she answered soberly. "It was terribly simple, and ingenious too."

"Very." Peter ran his hand along the heavy davit which curved out from the guard rail. It ended in a large ring from which dangled a length of strong line.

"The ladder," Peter pointed out, "is awkward. Mark must use this rope to slide down. Friday night it was used for another purpose."

"To hang poor Jane."

The line swung limp in the breeze.

"Do you think Jane was the gamesy sort?" Peter asked. "Would she slide down a rope or use the ladder?"

"Ladder," Mara answered promptly. "She wouldn't wrap those nylons around any rope."

"Then the noose could have been tied in advance. All the murderer had to do was to get it around her neck." He stopped with a puzzled frown. "But how the devil did he manage that?" he muttered.

"Let's go down and investigate." Mara opened the gate and felt for the ladder. "Golly, these rungs are far apart!" She sank from sight gradually, ribbons of fog winding around her head, giving an underwater effect. Peter followed quickly, closing the gate behind him.

"Quite a ladder!" Mara gasped as she dropped to the floor of the boat. She looked around her critically. "Sort of a public trysting place, isn't it?" she observed. "I mean, who would want to meet Mark right out in front of God and all the fishermen this way?"

"You have a sordid mind. Besides, they could get away from the fishermen in a matter of minutes. Let's see what we can find."

"The key, for one thing," Mara pointed to the ignition. "She didn't take a purse with her. Remember? They said it was on her dresser."

The key was in the lock, and a paddle hung from it lettered with the name of the boat and the Creadys' address and telephone.

"It will be wiped clean," Peter shrugged. "People read too many mystery stories these days. This seat has been washed." He pointed to a long swipe across the leather. "Probably removing tell-tale footprints."

"One of the Grayson crowd was a mystery fan," Mara recalled. "Which one was it?"

"Eliazbeth Cready, for one. So is Titus. This fog doesn't help any," Peter grumbled. "I'll take the front and you take the back. Pick up anything you see."

PONSONBY jackknifed his long body and carefully scrutinized the rubber matting. It had been cleaned. *Of course*, he thought bitterly. He took the cushions from the seats and found nothing but an empty flap of matches and two bobby pins. The pins he put in his coat pocket. So far as he could see in the misty light, none of the glass dials looked smudged or finger-printed.

"Nothing here that the murderer didn't intend to leave," Peter said finally. "We might as well go on up."

Mara sat on one of the seats and stared up at the pier. "Let's stay awhile," she suggested. "We may get an inspiration."

"We may get pneumonia too," Peter said, and sneezed explosively.

Without touching it he examined the line dangling just above the boat. It hung straight and the end had been freshly cut. "Not a new rope," he observed, "but still not the rope that killed our Janie."

"Why isn't it the same?" Mara asked. "It wouldn't show anything."

"It would to a microscope, my small-brained pigeon. It would show hunks of neck. This is old rope, dirty rope, but it had to be cut to the right length."

"A new piece could have been traced," Mara said regretfully.

"Precisely what the murderer had in mind. I still don't see how it was done."

Ponsonby knotted the rope in a running bowline and stood back to survey the effect. With the noose opened it hung some seven feet above the flooring where he stood. "So much for that," he said, and sat down to stare at the deadly trap. "We've got a noose just like the noose that murdered dear old Jane," he hummed. "The sixty-four-dollar question is: how did he get her into it?"

"It had to be ready and waiting," Mara said suddenly, and her voice was excited. "Look, Peter! Suppose the murderer came down as soon as it was dark and tied a business like that. Someone," she said carefully, "who *knew* Jane was meeting Mark that night. Then he called the Creadys' house to keep Mark away. Jane came down just as she had planned."

A premonitory shiver waltzed up Ponsonby's spine. "Go on," he nodded, "you're doing fine."

"Jane got here at nine," Mara continued

softly. "She spoke to the Mariner and got into the boat. Mark wasn't there, but what of it? Jane was happy; she could wait. Then the murderer spoke to her. From up there." She pointed through the misty fog to the little gate. "Someone she knew well. Maybe the murderer asked her to come back up. Maybe he came down."

"That's it," Peter cut in. "It had to happen on the ladder. He waited until she came up to meet him, slipped the halter over her neck, and pushed her off."

"The rungs are wet and slimy," Mara added, "and Jane had on high heels."

"Yes, but that isn't as important as the fact that Jane was *unsuspecting*. It was someone she trusted."

Mara laughed shakily. "Poor Jane. I guess she never read his poetry."

"Oh, for God's sake!" Peter sighed. "Try to keep an open mind. Here. Trot up the ladder part way and try this on for size. You don't have to buy it," he said comfortingly as he handed her the noose.

"How They Brought the Good Noose from Aix to Ghent," she quipped, and started her ascent.

Mara really had superlative legs. Pin-up legs, long and beautifully curving, with small smooth knees.

PETER was brought out of his pleasant reverie by Mara's cool voice. "If you please," she said, "I was asking how you liked my necklace."

"Very pretty! Very pretty indeed!"

"Then look at it!"

"Too foggy. I'm coming up." The ladder was slippery and the noose was in the way, but he kissed her all the same, roughly, urgently. "You can blame that on your legs," he told her. "Now would you care to jump off and test this booby trap?"

"Not today, thanks. Was this thing just dangling here when Jane came down the ladder, Peter?" She slipped it over her head and let it fall loose. In the fog it looked sinister.

"It couldn't have been. Jane might have seen it."

"Where was it, then? Not up on the pier. Let's act it out, and maybe we'll see how it was done."

"Just a ham at heart." He kissed her again and went up to the gate. "Go on

back to the boat," he ordered, "and I'll lure you to your fate."

In a minute her voice floated up, faint and far away. "I'm ready."

"Jane!" he called softly. "Jane, are you there?"

"Yes, Stepfather. What do you want?"

"We don't *know* it was York."

"I do. Go on."

"I have a telegram for you," Peter improvised. "Come and get it."

"Read it to me, Stepfather," Mara said coyly.

"I haven't my glasses, dear. This dialogue is terrible, Mara. We'll have to get a new script writer. Come and get this damned telegram."

"All right. Now you start down the ladder and I'll start up." They met halfway to the top. "He had to do it when Jane reached up," Mara decided.

"It doesn't work," Peter sighed. "I can't get the line from here. The noose had to be handier than that."

"Then it was fastened to the ladder or the pilings," Mara said positively.

Peter turned to inspect the slick green supports. "No place to fasten it," he said. "And the rope isn't long enough to loop around."

"Probably whatever fastened it has been removed, then. Let me up there." Mara clambered past him and bent to peer at the evil-smelling wood. "Here it is!" she announced. "Oh, rather, here it *was*."

"What did he use?"

"A staple. There are two small clean holes, and—Peter—there's something shiny stuck in the wood. Trade places with me."

"It's the point of a knife," Peter said after he had dug it out. "Keep it, even if it does set a new record for small clues."

Mara studied the bit of metal in the palm of her hand. "This is as bad as solving a murder with one cat hair," she complained. "Besides, it isn't the point of a knife."

"All right, Watson, what is it?"

"How should I know?" Mara replied tartly. "I only know it's too flimsy to be part of a knife blade. He used it to dig out the staple, I suppose."

"Um-hmn, that's the catch. If the staple was in that tight, how did he get the noose loose?"

"Cut out the jive talk. He tied the noose

to the staple with a string or thread, of course. That's why the staple *had* to be in tight."

Peter looked down admiringly. "That's marvelous of you," he applauded. "So now we know where the murderer stood. Go back one step and reach up again."

Carefully he swung out at a perilous angle and caught the noose. "Here's your telegram, Jane dear," he said, "and *that ain't all!*" He dropped the loop over her head, jerked it tight, and placed his foot against her chest. "As easy as that," he said smugly. "It's a terrible temptation." He loosened the rope and tried not to hear Mara's unladylike remarks as she rubbed her throat.

"O.K.," he said cheerfully, "so I'm a cad, a brute, and a dirty name. Now let's go and catch us a murderer."

"Do you know who did it?"

"No, but I think I know how to find out now, and that's almost as good."

They climbed back to the pier, closed the little gate, and looked into the thickening fog. Most of the bathers had left, their holiday spoiled by the change in weather. The foghorn had begun its mournful warning.

"Don't you love the foghorn?" Mara asked.

"Not particularly. It sounds like the bawling of a hungry calf. Which reminds me that Alicia will be waiting lunch for us. Let's scam, lamb."

"The things you pick up from your students!" Mara took his arm and matched her stride to his. As they moved from the pier to the highway a black sedan roared into life and raced off toward the town.

Mara's laugh was hollow. "Don't look now," she said weakly, "but I think the murderer was watching us."

## X

FOG CLUNG WISPILY to the trees of Cyprus Avenue. It was not a cool fog: it was warm and depressing. Peter slid from the sticky leather seat with a sigh of relief and tossed his coat over his shoulder.

"We're late," Mara murmured.

"Aren't we always?"

Ken stood on the porch steps, waiting—obviously—for his guests.

"Sorry," Peter called. "You should have gone ahead without us."

Ken turned furtively from left to right, scanning the street, before he jerked his head toward the house. "Come inside," he said shortly. "I have something to show you."

Mara's eyebrows crawled up inquiringly. Peter shrugged and followed her into the house.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"I found this under the door." Ken held out an envelope.

Peter took it by the corners and turned it over thoughtfully. The name "Peter" had been cut from a slick-paper magazine and pasted on the front. Inside was a single sheet of tablet paper folded over twice. To it was glued a strip of cheap stock bearing the song title, "Get Out of Town." Peter laughed without humor and turned the page so that the other two could read it.

"Fan mail," he said wryly. "Any idea how it was left?"

"None," Ken answered. "It was under the hall rug with just a corner sticking out."

"In other words, it could have been there overnight." Peter sighed. "Or it may have been left this morning when we were all out. Well," he added more cheerfully, "we have Jane's murderer worried, anyway." He went off upstairs whistling the Cole Porter melody.

After shaving and showering he walked along to Mara's room.

"You look sweet." She smiled and kissed him. "You shaved again."

"I had to. I'm precocious; five-o'clock shadow at noon." Peter picked up her powder puff and ran it over his smooth pink jowls.

"What do you make of the threatening letter?" Mara asked.

"Not threatening, really, just warning. I take it at its face value. Jane's murderer wants us to get out of town."

Mara brushed the smooth wings of her brows with a small stiff brush. "Maybe," she said thoughtfully, "we should tell Amos. The paper could be traced, and the magazines from which the words were clipped."

"We could also do with a crime laboratory, search warrants, and a really bright

detective," Peter grinned, "but it wouldn't be as much fun. I'd like to play it my way for a few more hours. Let's talk to our two pet suspects this afternoon."

"York and Titus? Good! We'd better go down for lunch now." She turned at the door and gave him her brilliant smile. "I love you."

"I love you too." He caught one of her hairpins and poked it in at random. "Remind me to marry you someday."

**P**ROFESSOR York's house was undeniably Class A, even by Peggy Ann's high standards. Peter parked at the curb, fearful of disturbing the perfection of the gravel driveway, and walked with Mara along the beautifully laid flagstone walk. Velvet lawns rolled back from a low stone wall, engulfed classically grouped trees, and came to rest against the white brick house. Everything, Peter observed, from the hand-hewn shingles to the leaded-glass windows, was exactly right.

A Chinese houseboy led them through a drawing room of subdued elegance to the gardens at the rear. Clad in old flannels and sandals, Professor York was taking up his lily bulbs. He gave Peter a strong, if grubby, hand and apologized to Mara for his appearance.

"You'll find that we live very informally here," he smiled, flashing his excellent teeth at her. "And we spend a lot of time in our gardens."

"Yours is very beautiful," Mara replied dutifully.

"Thank you. It represents a great deal of work, both mine and the gardener's." He took a T shirt from a garden chair and pulled it over his sunburned torso. "Let's go up on the terrace," he suggested, "and have something cold to drink."

"Have you heard anything from Jane?" Peter asked after the houseboy had left the beer on the table and glided away.

"Nothing." York stretched out comfortably and chuckled. "But we will," he added. "Jane knows I'll worry if she doesn't get in touch with me soon."

Peter wondered what *soon* meant to York and how long Jane could be unaccountably absent before the bland English professor became alarmed.

He was surprised to hear himself ask, "What do you mean by soon?"

York shrugged indifferently. "I see nothing remarkable about her being away over the week end. We will hear something tomorrow, I imagine."

"How does Titus feel about it?"

"Her husband?" York chuckled softly.

"More relieved than anything. Clive is a scientist first and a man second," he smiled. "Jane's trips leave him free to bury himself in his lab. I called him this morning, by the way, after I talked to Kenneth, and suggested that we both say she was staying with friends in Del Monte. That was a good idea," he nodded. "People here are inclined to make a great deal out of very trivial events."

"As they did when your wife died, I understand," Peter sympathized.

"Yes." York sighed in remembrance.

"That was very unpleasant. Very unpleasant, indeed."

"Did they ever trace that anonymous phone call?"

"Phone call? You mean the one suggesting an autopsy? No, nothing was done about it at the time, and later they couldn't trace it. Funny thing, that," he said soberly. "Pure malice, apparently, because it did nothing but blacken my reputation. It certainly didn't bring Blanche back." He sighed again.

"I hate to be impertinent," Peter said with a beguiling smile, "but does Jane have a good deal of money at her disposal?"

"Oh yes," York nodded. "Quite a great deal. Her mother's estate was divided equally between us. Why?"

"I don't know." Peter was deliberately offhand. "Somehow I still find it difficult to think of this disappearance as a practical joke. I keep trying to find some other explanation."

"Really?" York sounded surprised. "But of course, you don't know Jane."

"That's true," Ponsonby admitted. "Is she in good health? Is she emotionally stable?"

"Physically perfect and with only quite ordinary variations from complete emotional stability. Are you trying to build a case for amnesia?" He laughed heartily at the idea.

"Maybe. Or suicide."

York sobered instantly. "Jane would never commit suicide," he answered coldly.

"She felt very strongly about it in her mother's case. She found it inexcusable." He made suicide sound like a breach of good manners.

"Would anyone have been blackmailing Jane?"

Professor York studied his sandaled foot for a minute and then tipped his handsome head to stare quizzically at Peter. "You've heard this silly gossip about Mark Cready," he said reproachfully. "There's nothing to it, my dear fellow. Absolutely nothing to it." He sounded very sure. "Mark is a splendid chap but he is"—he groped for the word with the exact shade of meaning—"indiscreet, I am afraid. He has made numerous overtures to Jane, all of which she has repulsed. Naturally."

"Naturally," Mara murmured.

YORK embraced them both in a knowing glance. "Between ourselves," he admitted, "I engaged Cready unsight, unseen, because of the excellence of his writing. It was a mistake, and I shall have to let him go after next term. I have already intimated as much to him. When Jane told me he had been trying to see her alone I made some inquiries and discovered that Mark had an unsavory record. Just can't leave the women alone," York confided.

Ponsonby was willing to admit that Professor York had his merits, but it seemed to him one of the minor academic tragedies that he should sit in judgment on Mark Cready, who had, after all, written a great book on the Continental Roots of the Comedy of Manners and who knew more about the Restoration than any man in America.

"Do you feel certain that Jane hasn't met with an accident?" Peter asked, knowing what the answer would be.

"Quite certain," York smiled, fulfilling Peter's expectations. "She wasn't driving, and if she went off with friends—as she undoubtedly did—we would have heard of any serious wreck."

"And there would be no reason to suspect anything sinister?"

"Sinister?" York repeated the word as though it were new to him. "You mean—murder?" That, too, was unfamiliar on his tongue. "Why, of course not!"

He looked at Ponsonby for a long minute and then smiled. "You have a predilection for mystery, haven't you, Professor? For the moment I forgot your avocation."

"Did Jane have any enemies?"

"No. On the contrary, everyone here is very fond of her."

"One more thing," Peter suggested. "Do you mind telling me what you can about Jane's activities on last Friday?"

"Not at all. Let me think." York put his bronzed arms over his head and stretched as luxuriously as a cat. "I recall now," he nodded, relaxing. "I came home from the college about three and Jane was in the kitchen talking to Wong. She had been cutting flowers and she had arranged bouquets in the dining room and study. We came out here to visit. I offered her a cocktail, I remember, and she refused because she had just come from some luncheon. We sat here perhaps half an hour talking and then she left. I haven't seen her since."

"What were you talking about?" Mara asked bluntly.

"Several things," York smiled. "The redecorating of an office building which we own jointly, for one thing. Jane wanted me to see the estimates before engaging the workmen. We also discussed whether or not we would have dinner together at the club. Wong," he explained, "takes Tuesdays off and Jane's Margaret takes Fridays. Normally I go to their house on Tuesday and they come here on Friday. However, this week Wong asked for Friday in order to spend it with his brother who was going through to San Francisco. As a matter of fact, Jane gave him a lift down the hill when she left."

"When did Wong come home?" Peter inquired.

"Saturday morning."

"I see," Peter didn't. Not at all. "Well, we'll nose around a bit," he promised, "and if we discover her whereabouts we'll let you know."

"Do that." York nodded amiably. "Keeps your hand in, doesn't it?" He rose, smiling, unaware of the insult he had dealt. "Before you go you must see something of my home," he urged. "Perhaps you and Miss Mallory can have dinner with me while you're here."

He shepherded them into the drawing room, where they dutifully admired three paintings, a cabinet of figurines and an exquisite Kwan Yin, and listened to the history of the ancient rug upon which they stood. In the perfect little library they saw a portrait of Jane—a Jane whose throat was pale and slender and whose eyes were happy—and received the poems they had been promised.

York autographed the book with a flourish and handed it to Mara. "Someone told me," he said archly, "that you also write verse."

"A little," Mara answered gently. Too gently for Mara.

"It isn't easy, is it?"

"No," Mara said honestly, despising York's facility. "No, it isn't easy to write good poetry." There was the faintest emphasis on the adjective, but York missed the implication.

"Don't be discouraged." He patted her shoulder and nodded encouragement. "Take it from one who knows: keep at it! Keep at it, and if it is good"—he held up an admonishing finger—"if it is *good*, recognition is sure to come."

"Thank you," Mara answered meekly. "I'll remember that." She held the book gingerly, as though a leper had just handed it.

MARA hurled the book to the floor of the car and swore roundly. "The big ape!" she muttered. "The great, self-opinionated anthropoid! No, I take that back: I like apes. What do you make of him now?" she demanded.

"He's the sort of teacher who has his students and faculty wrapped around his finger," Peter shrugged. "You find them on any campus. They're usually tall, handsome, glib, and insensitive. Eventually they become college presidents. Personally," he admitted, "I don't like York much, but that doesn't make him a murderer."

"What is all this business about Jane's disappearance being a joke?"

"I'm not sure," Peter said slowly. "Maybe York believes it."

"Maybe." Mara sounded skeptical.

"As I remarked, he is insensitive and self-centered. It's easier for him to think of Jane as flitting around enjoying her-



self than it is to worry about her disappearance."

"How do you suppose Mark feels about being dismissed next spring?" Mara asked curiously.

"I know how I'd feel." Peter's voice was grim.

"You're giving Mark a motive for murder."

"A pip."

Peter braked the car in front of Helen Herrick's small cottage and swung it sharply back to the right for the ascent to the college.

"Ken says Titus spends all day in his lab," Peter explained.

"It's a pretty campus. Were you ever here before, Peter?"

"Several years ago. That little Tudor building is for the English Department. It looks like York, doesn't it? We are after an uncompromising edifice labeled Life Sciences. Sing out if you see it.

They found it, standing new and raw on a freshly graded plot. The downstairs door was open and they stepped into the hollow quiet of the hall. Empty schools always gave Peter a strange, unreasonable heartache. Schools needed to be filled; they asked for strident voices and young laughter. An empty school made him feel old and unwanted, like a man revisiting the scenes of his childhood. Peter coughed in order to hear a familiar sound and thought how foolishly thin-skinned he was.

On the second floor they discovered a door with Titus's name on it and knocked. After a minute they heard footsteps, light and unhurried, and a lock turned.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," Peter apologized. "Can you give us a few minutes, please?"

Interruptions were not welcomed. It was apparent in the suspicious glint of Titus's hooded eyes and in his voice, where antagonism was thinly veiled. "A few minutes," he said pointedly. "I'm very busy."

"I'm sure you must be," Mara smiled. "Work like yours takes an appalling amount of time, doesn't it? What a splendid lab!"

"What is your field?" Titus asked with a glimmer of interest.

"Psychology. But a great deal of my undergraduate work was done in Biology."

This was a bald-faced lie.

"May we sit down somewhere for a minute?" Peter asked quickly.

"In here." Titus languidly waved them into a small office and sat behind the flat-topped desk. He pulled cigarettes from his pocket and lit one without passing them.

"What's on your mind?" His grin was ugly. "Mystery?"

"In a way. Everyone seems to be worrying about your wife's disappearance," Peter explained. "Some of them seem to think that I—we," he corrected hastily, "may be able to run her down."

"Strangers," Mara added, with a vague but enchanting smile. "A new point of view and all that."

"Why not?" Titus shrugged indifferently. "You're better qualified than anyone around here, certainly."

"Thank you," Peter said stiffly. "Do you mind giving me your version of Friday?"

"Friday? Oh, of course, the last time Jane was seen. Let me think for a moment."

TITUS tipped back in his swivel chair, enjoying the situation. "I ate breakfast alone," he reported. "As usual. I came here and taught two classes and went home to eat lunch. Alone, as usual. I worked in the lab all afternoon except for a few minutes when I went for the mail and had a cup of coffee in the Faculty Lounge.

"Then I went home for dinner about six-thirty. I suppose everyone has told you it was Margaret's day off," he threw in. "Jane was in her room, and as I recall it she was wearing a house coat or negligee or something of that sort. She complained of a headache and asked me if I would mind eating at the club and going on to the Grayson's alone. I think she promised to take an aspirin and curl up with a good book."

His voice was acid. "I ate and came over here to type an article for the *Journal*. It was eleven or after when I went home for the last time. I can't tell you whether the maid was in or not, because I simply turned off the lights and went up to my room. Saturday morning I looked in on Jane and discovered that her bed had not been slept in. That's all."

"Anything to indicate that she had gone away?" Peter asked.

"Nothing. The house coat was on the dressing-table bench and her purse was on the dresser."

"What clothes were gone?" Mara inquired.

"I'm sure I wouldn't know." Titus yawned delicately, like a well-fed cat. "My wife's wardrobe is extensive. I've never taken inventory."

"Do you think Jane has left you?" Peter asked bluntly.

"It's quite possible," Titus nodded. "But if she has, it was with the connivance of her stepfather."

"Why?"

Titus grinned wolfishly. "I see that you haven't been enlightened as to the terms of Mrs. York's will," he said. "I can understand that." It was plain that he had found a subject dear to his heart, something into which he could sink his vulpine teeth.

"My esteemed father-in-law," he sneered, "is the fair-haired boy of this town. On the campus, at least. His friends are more than just ordinary friends, they are disciples—if you know what I mean. I expect they have given you a very distorted picture of James York, poet and teacher." The titles were corrosive on Clive Titus's tongue.

"To really understand Jim," Titus went on, "you have to know something about Blanche."

"I'd like to," Peter murmured encouragingly.

"Blanche was a brilliant woman. She was a woman very much like George Fawcett: intelligent, educated in the sciences, stimulating to talk with. Her father had been a professor of chemistry and her mother was one of the McLanes. Blanche inherited a good mind and a great deal of money. Her first husband was a distant cousin of hers—another scientist—who died while experimenting with a highly dangerous bacteria. A year or two later Blanche married York, who had been one of her father's pupils and a frequent visitor in their home. That was a mistake." Titus lidded his eyes and smiled bitterly. "York married her for her money. Over a period of twenty years he wore her down to mental and physical illness."

"And then murdered her," Peter suggested pleasantly.

"Possibly." Titus nodded in serious agreement. "I thought so at the time, but later I revised my opinion."

"Why?"

"Jane told me that her mother had only a short while to live. Jim knew that. After waiting twenty years it doesn't seem reasonable that he would have grown impatient over a matter of another one or two. However," he shrugged, "suicide or murder, Blanche died a year ago last April and she was well out of an intolerable situation."

"Now we come to the matter of her will. A trust fund was set up wherein Jim and Jane inherited equally and each was beneficiary to the other. But there were strings attached: Jane forfeits hers if she divorces me, and Jim cannot remarry. That is why I do not think Jane has left me unless she has worked out some deal with Jim whereby he will return the money to her when she is free."

PETER sighed gustily. "No one told us about the will. They certainly didn't. You have suggested a rather terrible possibility," he added a minute later. "Do you think Jim York would murder Jane in order to get the money?"

"Do you have any reason to suppose Jane has been murdered?" Titus asked sharply.

"Only in as much as any disappearance carries that threat," Peter answered obliquely.

The lines around Clive's mouth were cruel. "If you find she has been," he said, "Jim has the best motive in the world. I, on the other hand, stand to lose a very comfortable home and gain nothing."

"Who besides Jim would have a motive?"

"Mark Cready or his wife. Mark is not in love with Jane and she is with him. Jane could be very troublesome in a situation of that sort."

"And Elizabeth Cready," Peter supplied, "would have the ancient motive of jealousy."

"No," Titus said unexpectedly. "Elizabeth isn't jealous. She knows Mark is too attractive to keep out of trouble. Elizabeth's motive would be gain. If she could

kill Jane," he said slowly, "*and make it look as though Jim had done it*, Jim would be ousted from the college. Mark could keep a job he is about to lose and he might even succeed to the post of chairman because of his splendid record. If he did, Elizabeth could give up this drifting from school to school and put down roots."

"Anyone else?"

Titus scowled and considered the littered desk. "Helen Herrick. She has been in love with Jim for twenty-five years."

"Hell," Peter quoted, "hath no fury like a woman scorned."

Titus nodded. "That's right. Maybe her emotions have gone sour. She might frame Jane out of revenge." He smiled faintly at the idea. "It sounds farfetched, doesn't it?"

"No," Peter said soberly. "It sounds quite reasonable. In this case, you see, the woman was scorned twice. The first time Jim preferred Blanche; the second time he preferred Blanche's money. It's worth investigating."

Peter rose reluctantly and stood over the desk. "Did Jane have a date with Mark on Friday evening?" he asked.

"Not as far as I know," Titus shrugged. "But then Jane and I go our separate ways."

"I see. Well, thanks a lot, and I hope we won't have to bother you again."

"If you do," Titus said at the door, "you will find me here or at home or at the club. My life is singularly uncomplicated."

"Golly!" Mara said happily when they were downstairs again. "What he did to Jim York!"

"Fixed him right up," Peter agreed absently. "I want to make a phone call." He stepped into the booth by the main entrance and dialed York's house. After a lengthy exchange he joined Mara and they went back to the car.

"The boys," he informed her, "have a mutual despising society. Did you ever notice that when a will hamstring the beneficiaries that way there is always a charity or something which gets the money in the end?"

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that I called Jim York and asked him what happened to all that moo-

lah if both he and Jane died or violated the conditions of the will, and he tells me Titus gets everything for research. He was sore as hell because Titus had discussed it."

"Oh, jeepers," Mara sighed. "It looked so simple before that."

"Um-hmn. That was exactly the impression Titus wanted us to get. It's beginning to make sense," Peter said cheerfully. "We have an advantage over everyone but the murderer," he pointed out. "We know Jane's dead, and we know how she died and when. And we are beginning to understand why."

"Look," he said earnestly. "Either Jim York killed Jane or someone is trying to make him take the rap. If he did it, he did it for money. That's easy. But if someone else killed Jane, then Jane wasn't killed because she was Jane but because she was Jim's stepdaughter, and Jim has the best motive in the world, as anyone can see. Do I make myself clear?"

MARA grinned. "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers. Yes, I think I get the general idea. Amos implied that Jane's death was in the cards. But Jim York isn't the only one who's in a tight spot, darling," she said soberly. "Mark Cready is too. After all, Mark was Jane's lover, he was getting kicked out of the department because of her, and she died on his boat. Or over it."

Peter sighed. "I know."

"Maybe he's been pushed around too long. Maybe appointments are getting hard to find."

"He can teach for me any time," Peter answered grimly. "Provided, of course, that he makes his conquests somewhere besides in my home."

"The possessive type, Goody! And Titus had a good point when he said Elizabeth wanted to put down roots."

"Um-hmn, except that Elizabeth is already resigned to moving on. She doesn't sound like a person who had just insured her permanence here."

The car slid into the space in front of the Graysons' old house and Peter switched off the motor. "Candy has gone calling again, I see."

"The Mallorys are a gregarious lot."

In Helen Herrick's neat garden a hot

and dirty Candy Too raced about ecstatically. Miss Herrick looked wan and tired; a wisp of hair straggled across her damp forehead and her lipstick was worn to a thin rim.

"Helen is showing the strain," Mara grinned. "Let's save her from a Fate Worse Than Death."

"Have you had her long?" Peter asked as they opened the gate.

"Only an hour or so." Miss Herrick's pale smile made it seem much longer. "We've had a lovely time together."

"Lovely time," Candy parroted. She ran and threw herself against Helen's wrinkled skirt and shrieked with pleasure. "Candy loves Aunt Helen. Aunt Helen, you be the Maidenstress again and I'll be a Shiningknightnarmor and rescue you. Once more, Aunt Helen. This will be all."

"No more, Candy." Miss Herrick sagged into a convenient chair. "Tomorrow I'll be a Maiden in Distress and you shall be the Knight in Shining Armor."

"You're very popular," Mara observed. "I'm glad," Helen said simply. "I like children." She tried to subdue the supercharged Candy. "Quiet, darling! Tomorrow we'll play again."

"Come on, moppet. I'm jealous." Peter flung Candy into the air and seated her on his shoulder. "What happened to the Graysons?" he asked.

Helen shook her head. "I don't know. Alicia and Georgianna Fawcett went off about an hour ago, and right afterward Ken brought Candy over and asked if I'd take care of her."

Peter sat down abruptly and peered at Helen over Candy's fat pink legs. "Miss Herrick," he asked. "what do you make of Jane Titus's disappearance?"

Helen's face went white so that her prominent eyes were more sea green than ever. "I'm frightened," she admitted. "Terribly frightened, Professor Ponsonby."

"Do you think she has left Clive?"

"Oh no! She couldn't do that because of the—" She stopped short and looked down at her hands. "No, I don't think she left Clive."

"You were about to say because of the terms of her mother's will, weren't you? What did you make of the trouble when her mother died?"

Her eyes met his, wide and frightened.

"What has Blanche's death to do with Jane?" she asked.

"I don't know. Does it have anything to do with her?"

"No. Blanche was in ill-health and committed suicide. Amos Schroeder said so. There is no connection between that and Jane's disappearance."

"What do you think has happened to Jane?" Peter asked.

"I don't know." Miss Herrick shook her head as if to clear it. "But it isn't any joke. When she was first missed Clive should have gone to the police about it."

PETER did a quick double-take, but Miss Herrick was quite serious. "That's funny," he smiled. "Everyone else wants to avoid the police. They seem to think it would stir up a hornet's nest of trouble for Dr. York."

Helen nodded agreement. "It would, but Jim has nothing to fear. Instead, he and Clive have circulated an untruth about her visiting in Del Monte. You mark my word, Professor," Miss Herrick said soberly, "someone will make a slip and it will be all over town that Jane is missing. When that happens it is going to look much worse for Jim than if he had enlisted the help of the police at the start of all this."

"Why?" Peter purred. As if he didn't know!

"When Jim's wife died," Helen explained, "there was some question as to whether she had committed suicide or not. She did, of course, but it damaged Jim's reputation just to have it questioned. His friends were very loyal but they couldn't stop all the gossip. And I do not think that he could survive another investigation. Professionally, I mean."

"Are you suggesting that Jane is dead too?"

"Of course not. If there had been an accident we would have heard by now."

"How about—murder?"

Helen clasped her hands until the knuckles stood out white and middle-aged. "That's absolutely unthinkable," she said faintly. "Why would anyone kill Jane?"

"As I understand the will, Jim has an excellent motive."

Helen shook her head reproachfully. "Don't joke about it," she pleaded. "Be-

cause that is exactly what his enemies would say if—if—"

"I understand. Miss Herrick, is there someone among Jim's friends who *isn't* a friend?" Peter asked. "Someone who might want to put him in a very bad light?"

Helen didn't protest indignantly. She pushed the hair back from her damp forehead and studied a spike of delphinium. "I don't know," she said. "When Blanche died someone called Amos Schroeder and suggested that her death had been—unnatural. We never knew who did it, but it happened within an hour after she died; hardly anyone knew she was dead. So it may be that there is someone . . ." The sentence trailed away. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason." Peter shrugged. "I'm just filling in the background."

"Background for—murder?" Helen asked quietly.

"You're way ahead of me." Peter rose with a grin and settled Candy more comfortably on his neck. "There is no slightest reason to believe Jane has been killed," he lied, "except that all disappearances carry that possibility. Thanks again for taking care of the brat."

"I enjoyed it," Helen smiled.

"Oh yes," Peter remarked casually. "In trying to understand Jane and this strange disappearance I've been asking each of her friends how they spent Friday afternoon and evening. I thought I might get a picture of Jane's movements that way. Do you mind contributing?"

"Not at all. I helped Alicia until about four and then I saw Jane's car over here and came home. We talked for a while out here in the garden and she suggested that we all have supper at her house on Sunday—today—if the weather was nice. After she left I went back and made sandwiches for Allie. At six I came home and fixed supper, and a few minutes later Peggy Ann Larsen came in with her survey. I asked her to take pot-luck and afterward we walked down to the movie. It was an excellent show: Fred MacMurray and a documentary film. I suppose it was after eleven when I came home and went to bed."

"The Graysons' party was in full swing?"

"Yes." Helen's voice was wistful. "It sounded like lots of fun. The men were sitting around the poker table and the radio was going."

"I see. Well, thanks again for everything."

## XI

AS THEY CROSSED the street Peter asked, "How do you feel about the whole thing now?" He knew how he felt.

"Thoroughly confused," Mara sighed.

"Me too. Let's ditch out for a while and see if we can unscramble it."

"We could go and have a drink." Mara suggested, brightening, "if there is anyone to take care of Candy."

"I want a drink too," Candy said.

"Stick to milk," Peter advised.

"Milk isn't fizzy. Milk is flat."

Mara grinned. "Cute, huh? Shows the sort of environment she has at home. Good! Here comes George's car."

The old car sputtered to a stop in the driveway and Alicia and George got out.

"Wonder where the girls have been," Peter lipiped. "They look raddled."

Alicia met them at the gate, a hot and dusty Alicia with pine needles clinging to her hair. "Have you learned anything more about Jane?" she asked fearfully. "Do you know where she is?"

"No, do you?" Peter countered.

Allie's pleasant little face went pink and then white. "No," she gasped. "Of course not. How should I?"

"Would you mind terribly if we left Candy with you for half an hour?" Mara smiled. "I want to go to the drugstore."

Allie accepted the change in conversation with gratitude. "Not at all," she answered. "Shall I give her some dinner about five? I thought the rest of us wouldn't eat until later, it's so very hot."

"That would be marvelous. Be a good girl, Candy," Mara admonished her. "Mind Aunt Alicia."

"Sure." Candy's active mind leaped ahead with the agility of a mountain goat. "Aunt 'Licia," she began, "I want a pair of gloves. Do you have any gloves I can wear? I'm a knightnarmor and I wear gaun'lets. Do ycu have any, Aunt 'Licia? Do you?"

IT WAS GOOD to be in motion. Peter felt the wind flatten against his hot body and reached out for Mara's hand. "Does anything about this case strike you as peculiar?" he asked presently.

"Yes. The fact that they all know York did it but they won't admit it."

"One-track mind," he deplored. "I mean, the person who killed Jane had to know she was going to meet Mark at the boat. He—or she—had to know it almost as soon as Jane did. There, my dear Watson, is the crux of the matter. How the devil could anyone know?"

"Jim York may be lying. Jane could have told him when she was there in the afternoon."

"The date wasn't made until six or after," Peter reminded her.

"I forgot. That lets out all the people who saw her in the afternoon." Mara tried a new line. "Look," she suggested. "Margaret—the maid—was away from home. York could have been there when Jane talked to Mark."

"That's what I was thinking. Or Titus could have been home. We have only his word for it that he wasn't. Suppose, just for fun," Peter said dreamily, "that he's telling the truth, even. Jane could have told him she was going to meet Mark and pitch woo. Maybe she taunted him with the fact. Titus could have waited until dark, prepared the noose, and spoken to Jane after she boarded the boat. Like York, Titus could call her up the ladder for the hypothetical telegram or whatever it was."

"It works all right, except for a motive."

"Oh, Clive has several," Peter remarked nonchalantly. "He hates Jane, he hates Jim, and he probably hates Mark."

"His motives aren't as strong as Jim's," Mara said persistently.

"No, but while York may have the stronger motive he may also be the stronger man, my pet."

Peter wheeled the car in a forbidden U turn and parked in front of a dingy little bar displaying an Air Conditioning sign and some large bird unknown to zoology.

"A sea gull, do you think?" Peter asked.

"Or an albatross. No matter. The drinks will be the same in any case."

Peter shooed flies from the dusty screen

and opened it for Mara. Inside, a scarred and ringed bar ran down one side of a narrow room, balanced by four high-backed booths on the other wall. Peter and Mara sat down near the door and ordered Collinses from a spry old man in a soiled apron. The drinks, when they came, were strong and surprisingly good.

Mara gave him her shining smile through a sprig of mint. "All right, Sherlock," she invited. "Give."

"Let's systematize what we have discovered to date," Peter suggested. "We know for a fact that Jane was killed and that her body was taken away in the boat about nine-fifteen on Friday evening. We know that her murderer deposited the body on the Tor and brought the boat back to the pier. Now what does that tell us about the murderer?"

"Is the question rhetorical or do I answer it? He's someone Jane trusted, as you've mentioned before."

"That's the first point," Peter nodded. "Second, it had to be someone who knew she was going to the boat. Third, the murderer can operate a boat. Fourth, our murderer acts boldly."

"Fifth," Mara added, "the murderer is York or a reasonable facsimile thereof."

"Stop that!" Peter ordered. "The murderer is Jim York or someone with a knife in Jim's back. But just to humor you, let's start by assuming York is our man," Peter agreed magnanimously. "He loves money and what money will buy. Who doesn't?" he threw in parenthetically. "When his wife died . . ."

"A nice way of putting it," Mara sneered.

"When Blanche York died, Jim discovered that he got only half of the estate. Greedy for more, he plotted some way of disposing of Jane. Perhaps he tried to break up her marriage. That," he admitted, "would have been the easiest way of getting the money. Failing to do that, he killed her. He used the boat, hoping to throw suspicion on Cready—as the lover—and he put Jane on the Tor because it was the only place where he could run the boat in. He is purposely taking the attitude that Jane's disappearance is a joke because he wants time enough for evidence to become confused."

"It sounds perfect," Mara gloated.

PETER SIGHED. "The flaw in it is that York would be plunged into another investigation and would wind up on the outside of the college looking in, and, personally, I think Jim York intends to be head of the English Department until he becomes prexy. So much for your favorite suspect. Let's try Titus next."

"I like him almost as well as York," Mara said generously. "I won't be too disappointed if he is the murderer."

"That's white of you. Titus' motive is weak," Peter said sadly. "As an outraged husband he is badly miscast, and there is no money in it for him unless Jim York dies too. We know that he admired Blanche York and she must have been interested in his research. Perhaps he had been promised money which he never got."

"Maybe Blanche expected Jim and Jane to give him what he needed. They wouldn't, of course."

"That's the point. Jim and Jane controlled the purse strings, and Titus might plan to get at the money by killing Jane and making Jim take the rap. I suppose that sort of diabolical plan would strike Titus as good clean fun. He might even have some quixotic notion that he was vindicating Blanche's death."

"You're giving too many motives," Mara said critically. "None is strong by itself."

"I know. But he had the best opportunity of knowing about Jane's appointment with Mark, and he's someone Jane would go up the ladder to meet, and he's perfectly capable of killing her." He waved his glass for emphasis and the waiter took it as a signal for fresh drinks.

"The Creadys knew about the nine-o'clock date," Mara reminded him.

'All right, let's take them next. Mark wasn't in love with Jane and she was with him. Titus says she could be troublesome under those circumstances. If Mark is the murderer—which he isn't, of course—he did it to get rid of Jane, to stop the gossip, possibly to get Jim York ousted and to make secure his own position in the department. Too many motives again. Also, there is the matter of the call Jane—or someone—made at eight-thirty. If Mark is the murderer, who made the call and why?"

"It smells, doesn't it?"

"Um-hmn. Mark didn't do it," he added

confidently. "No one who writes like that could be a murderer."

"Oh, brother!"

"And men with Mark's fatal charm can't afford to go around killing off all the women who fall in love with them."

"How would you know, darling? Let's try Elizabeth, then."

"She's a better suspect than Mark, but not as good as York or Titus. She has a good motive: security."

"Security for Mark and a chance to put down roots here."

"That's it." He began to construct a hypothetical case. "Suppose Mark told her he expected to be dismissed next spring. Elizabeth then worked out a plan whereby she could put York in a position where he was certain to lose his chairmanship at the college. A new department head would keep Mark, probably. Mark might even be appointed to the position himself. In addition Elizabeth would have removed the very tempting Mrs. Titus and Mark would have a better chance of keeping his mind on his work. The Creadys live only four blocks from the water, so she could have gone down and fixed up the trap between eight-thirty and nine. I feel sure that Jane would have trotted up the ladder if Elizabeth had called her. Of course," Peter went on placidly, "it is harder to account for the eight-thirty phone call in the case of Elizabeth. We should find out if they have an extension."

"And how about the Cready's maid who is supposed to alibi Elizabeth?" Mara asked.

"The Cready maid? We'll have to check that too. I expect that with a little juggling of the time this way and that, Elizabeth could have been gone long enough to murder Jane."

"The Graysons are out in the clear," Mara continued, "so we have Helen and George left now. I can't believe either of them would do it."

PETER shrugged and sighed: "Who knows? Titus made a good point when he said Helen's emotions could have gone sour. She seems to have been in love with Jim all of her adult life, and twice she has been left twiddling her thumbs. She might be vindictive enough to frame him for Jane's murder."



"I don't see that she has anything to gain."

"She hasn't, in the material sense," Peter agreed. "But if Jim gets juggled for murder, people can't go around feeling sorry for her. They would applaud her good fortune and say how lucky she had been."

"Jane certainly would have trusted her," Mara added, entering into the spirit of the thing. "But how could she know about the date on the boat?"

"We always come back to that, don't we? Is Jim in love with Helen, do you think?"

Mara frowned at her empty glass. "I'm not sure. He doesn't give her any encouragement, but he looks pleased when she's near him."

"Jim would be afraid of 'talk,' I think," Peter nodded. "It would be one thing to play the gallant friend and champion so long as Blanche was living, and quite something else to beau Helen around after he became an eligible widower. Particularly," he added, "when he had no intention of marrying her. I expect he plays hard to get; a point which strengthens Helen's motive for murdering Jane and throwing the blame on Jim."

"I wonder if she killed Blanche too?" asked Mara.

"She could have. Hey!" he said excitedly. "How about Helen killing Jane because Jane knew—or suspected—that Helen had killed Blanche in order to marry Jim? That gives Helen a double-barreled motive."

"Listen, darling," Mara said patiently. "If you're going to start working on the theory that Jane knew too much, it gives a new motive for everyone. Jane wasn't killed because she knew too much. She was killed because she had money Jim wanted or because the murderer wanted it to look that way. You said so yourself. Besides," she said logically, "if Jane had known anything she would have sprung it long ago. Jane doesn't sound like the type to sit around on a keg of dynamite for over a year. She would want it to go Whammy! quick, just for the excitement of it."

"You're probably right," Peter shrugged and the waiter came for their glasses. "This is worse than an auction," Peter

grinned. "You don't dare wiggle your ears or it's interpreted as a bid."

"So we're left now with George," Mara reminded him.

"Such powers of deduction! George is my mystery gal," Peter said slowly. "I like George tremendously, and yet . . . It's silly, but I keep remembering all the stories in which the murderer calls in the so-called *detectif* in order to divert suspicion from himself."

"Silly is right."

"Um-hmn. I can't find any motive for her, I don't see how she could have known about the date on the boat, and she was at the Graysons' all of the time except for some part of the hour between ten and eleven. Do you suppose she's in love with Titus?"

"Oh, Peter!" Mara wrinkled her nose eloquently. "George is a top-flight scientist, and Titus would admire her for that. It doesn't follow that George entertains any affection for him or that he's anything more to her than a co-worker and friend, you see."

"I was only trying out the theory to see how it sounded," Peter said plaintively. "Then we'll put George out in the clear with the Graysons. Two and one make three. Three from eight leaves five. I think. These Collinses have authority."

"I think it's Jim York," Mara repeated stubbornly. "But my second choice would be Titus, and my third Mark Cready."

"Not Mark." Peter, too, could be stubborn. "Titus or York or Helen, for my money."

"Helen has an alibi. If she went to the show with Peggy Ann, she's as much out in the clear as the Graysons and George."

"Well, we agree on York and Titus, anyway."

"And we have our one itsy-bitsy clue," Mara reminded him. "The triangle of metal from the pier."

"And two bobby pins and a flap of matches, which mean nothing, probably. And Jane's jewelry, and an anonymous letter inviting us to get the hell out of here."

"And a black sedan," Mara concluded, "boiling away just as we came up from the boat."

"That's about the size of it." Peter shrugged and shook his head at the barman.

"What do we do next?"

Peter studied the flyspecked ceiling. "Talk to the Mariner. After that . . ." He spread his big hands out flat on the table top and fixed Mara with a bright stare. "After that we may have to dump the murder in their assembled laps."

Mara gasped in dismay. "Do you want to get us killed?"

"Un-uhn. I have plans," Peter leered, "which require our being alive and well. But if everyone knows everything, someone might louse up the murderer."

"What will you do with him when you catch him?"

"I'm glad you said 'when,' not 'if.' I'll turn him over to the group. They can mete out whatever justice appeals to their tidy academic minds or let Amos Schroeder take over."

Mara nodded violent agreement. "War-criminal technique," she said approvingly. "I hope they give him the works. Something rugged. Like having to read his own poetry aloud day after day after day."

Peter gave it up and concentrated on the really excellent Tom Collins.

## XII

"**C**ANDY TOO ATE a good dinner," Alicia reported, "and since the child had had no nap, I put her to bed. She isn't asleep, but she seems content to lie and chew her elephant."

"Candy is always content," Mara smiled, "as long as she has Pooh Bah. I'm sorry we took so long."

"That's all right." Alicia sat down and took her knitting from the bag. "It was fun for me," she sighed, "and it took my mind off other things." A needle slid to the floor and she clucked disgustedly. "Butterfingers! I'm so nervous I could scream." Resolutely she changed the subject. "Candy is a darling. I had forgotten how imitative three-year-olds could be."

"It's a dreadful age," Mara agreed. "Half make-believe, half reality; and you can't depend on anything they say."

"I found her some gloves to wear," Alicia chuckled. "She said she was a Knight in Shining Armor—only she says

a Shining Knight in Armor, which I think is much better—and she insisted that knights must have gauntlets. Some game Helen was playing with her, I suppose."

"Yes, we heard about it."

"I had to let her try six pairs before she was satisfied."

"I hope she didn't ruin them."

Alicia shook her head and smiled. "No, she didn't really like them. After a while she found an old pair in George's garden—huge things!—that suited her perfectly. She returned mine and wore George's to bed."

"She does that. For weeks she was Red Rider and went to bed in her mother's boots," Mara grinned.

Alicia's active mind raced off tangentially. "The MacGregors are having a dinner party at the club tonight, and Helen asked Jim to call for her," she informed them. "They may come over here first. Keeeeee-nneth!" she called shrilly.

Ken appeared in the doorway, his wispy hair standing on end, a book in his hands; five feet of earnest young professor. "What is it?"

"Nothing," Allie admitted. "I just wondered where you were. Did Jim say anything about coming over tonight?"

"No, he's going to some party at the club."

"I know that," Allie retorted tartly. "He's taking Helen. If they come in, can we give them a cocktail?"

"Yes. Call me when you want them." Ken retired into the house, his nose buried in his book.

"That's quite a romance, isn't it?" Peter observed mildly.

"Helen and Jim? Goodness, it's no romance at all." Alicia's needles chattered indignantly. "Helen is too old to entertain any such foolish notion. We both are," she added. "Helen and I put all of that sort of thing behind us when we were through college and settled down to holding our jobs and having an interesting and enjoyable life without the responsibilities of marriage. And we *have*," she said defiantly. "We like shows and books and lectures, and a great many things that don't require a husband." Illogically Alicia sighed and her small face was bleak.

"Marriage is a vastly overrated institu-

tion," lied Peter, who couldn't wait to forfeit his liberty. "Wasn't Helen engaged to Dr. York at one time?"

"Not really. It was just a—just an understanding," Alicia decided. "It never came to anything. Jim married Blanche, and Helen was her dearest friend. There they are now." She squinted for a better view of her neighbor. "That new green outfit of Helen's is just beautiful, isn't it?" It was the one Miss Herrick had worn to church.

"Hi!" Peter shouted. "Off to dinner?"

York and Helen cut across the street and came up onto the porch. Helen looked as triumphant as a girl on her first big date.

"Did Candy recover from our strenuous afternoon?" she laughed. "I have."

"She's sleeping it off," Peter grinned.

"Ken wants to give you a cocktail before you go," Alicia said hospitably, twisting the truth to her own purposes. "Why don't you go and help him, Jim?"

"Peter too," Mara smiled sweetly. "Peter is an expert at mixing drinks. Long practice," she added.

"Oh, they'll manage without me," Peter shrugged.

"But not so well," Mara insisted, and brought her heel down on his toes for emphasis.

LIMPING a little, Peter went into the house, but he did not go to the kitchen. He had no intention of missing one of Mara's excursions into subtlety. He stepped into the living room and stood beside the long door.

"I'm going to have to freshen up," Mara was saying mendaciously. "Do you mind getting me more towels, Alicia? Candy is such a little pig."

"Not at all, dear. I'll get them now, before I forget it. Excuse me, Helen."

Peter heard the unmistakable sound of knitting and needles being laid on the table, and a moment later Alicia paddled along the hall. This, Peter thought glumly, should be good.

"I'm mad about this town!" Mara exclaimed with spurious enthusiasm. "I've never been in a place that was so restful. Our campus is completely urban, of course, and about as quiet as a madhouse." Which was exactly the way she liked it.

"It's quiet here, certainly." Helen sounded faintly fretful. "Too quiet. I sometimes think. It gives the young people a very limited number of ways in which to amuse themselves."

Helen, Peter thought, would not like the cars parked along the beach road at night.

"That's true." Peter could visualize Mara nodding warmest agreement. "Although age doesn't seem to have much to do with it. Look at Jane and Mark Cready. Or maybe," she laughed with pretty embarrassment, "that's just gossip. Dr. York says it is."

"Jim's an awful ostrich about some things," Helen sighed. "Some of the talk about Jane and Mark was true. Jane loved excitement and this town doesn't offer much selection, so she started meeting Mark clandestinely." The expression sounded quaint and spinsterish.

"On his boat?" Mara quizzed.

"Usually. Although sometimes Mark went to the house when Clive was away."

Peter heard the rasp of Mara's match, and a minute later she said, "You have a marvelous bay for boating. I suppose all of you are enthusiasts."

"No," Helen answered, "not any more. We got out of the habit of it during the war. Jane and Clive sold their boat then, and Jim disposed of the *Sprite* to a man named Pender. He was in Romance Languages," she recalled, "and he wanted the boat for sketching. He moved to one of the Middle Western universities last year and sold the boat to Mark. Georgianna gets seasick, so the Fawcetts have never owned a boat, and the Graysons have never had one unless you count the little outboard Kenneth had while he was a student. They all go through that phase," she explained.

"Do you like boating?" Mara inquired politely.

"Very much, but I can hardly imagine myself owning one." Helen's voice expressed the absurdity of a middle-aged woman indulging such a sporty taste.

"The chairman of our department," Mara said chattily, "has an eighteen-foot cabin cruiser and we sometimes . . ."

Reluctantly Peter drew from the living room and walked toward the kitchen, from whence came the unmistakable sound of a

stirring rod being rotated in a glass pitcher.

"Just in time to sample it for us," York shouted jovially. "Tell us what is lacking."

The cocktails were cold and exquisitely aromatic. "Nothing is lacking," Peter grinned. "They're perfect."

"It was Dr. Ponsonby who taught me to make them," Ken admitted. "Martinis are his specialty. Bring the cheese and crackers, will you, Pete?"

Mara sat in the swing, smiling like the Cheshire cat.

"Here you are," Ken said, offering the tray. "Your own drink prepared according to the maestro's own recipe. Where's Allie?"

"Upstairs," Mara answered. "She's getting me some linen."

"We won't wait, Jim; I know you haven't much time."

"We haven't, for a fact." York pulled a wafer-thin watch from his pocket and held it off to focus. "After seven already," he clucked, and accepted a cocktail. "Here's to Jane's speedy return," he toasted. "I'm tired of the way you all fuss about her."

Helen put her glass aside untasted.

Ken strangled.

Mara nibbled her olive.

Peter lifted his glass in salute. "To her early discovery," he murmured ambiguously.

THE martinis nestled down cozily with the Collinses, giving the finishing touch to Ponsonby's happy inebriation. Pleasantly bemused, he listened to the shoptalk and the village gossip, and after the second round watched Jim and Helen depart in the big black sedan. He saw George Fawcett's decrepit car limp out of the driveway and turn down Cypress Avenue.

Still in a happy reverie, he ate Alicia's excellent cold supper and saw Mark and Elizabeth Cready walk by, swinging hands like a pair of teen-agers.

At nine o'clock Peter Ponsonby yawned, stretched, and sighed. "The fog has lifted," he observed cheerfully to anyone who would listen.

"It lifted about three o'clock, as I recall," Mara said tartly.

"I meant my alcoholic fog. Now I crave

a little action. Do you suppose your prescription is ready, Mara?"

"It should be," she answered, quick on the uptake. "If it isn't, we can wait."

"Anything the matter?" Ken asked solicitously.

"A touch of sinus." Mara blew her nose convincingly.

"Get anything from your tete-a-tete with Helen?" Peter inquired when they were headed toward the town.

"What did you think?" Mara's smile was malicious. "One of the first things you taught me, Peter, was to smell people."

"So now I smell." He sniffed haughtily.

"Um-hmn. I smelled you lurking behind the draperies." She laced her fingers in his and rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. "A nice potpourri of gin, pipe tobacco, and shaving cream."

"You were always a disconcerting pupil. Too bright. Why were you worrying at the Titus-Cready romance?" he asked.

"Because things look bad for Mark," she answered, "and you're too prejudiced to investigate all of the possibilities."

"He isn't the murderer."

"No, I don't think he is," Mara agreed, "but we can't put him out in the clear without a thorough check. It looks like practically everyone in the crowd could operate the boat, doesn't it?"

"Um-hmn."

"Especially Jim York," Mara said happily. "After all, it was his boat first."

Peter nodded slowly and watched the Cyprus Avenue traffic. "That's just it," he said. "That's part of the plan to frame Jim. It is someone's intention to plant *so much evidence* that Jim York will be convicted by John Doe and his missus, no matter what the police say. I think," he added softly, "that the murderer is overdoing it. It is all too, too obvious."

"I disagree with you. Jim York is essentially a stupid person and a conceited one. If he wanted to murder Jane he'd go ahead and do it, underestimating the police and overestimating his own smartness."

Mara understood people, and Peter knew better than to dismiss any theory of hers without examining it carefully. "You may be right," he conceded, "but doesn't it follow, then, that a really bright murderer would utilize those very traits to frame York?"

"Yes" Mara agreed. "It's a sort of draw, I guess, between Jim's stupidity and someone else's knowledge of Jim's stupidity."

Peter wheeled the car across Cyprus and back on the next street.

"Where are we going?" Mara asked.

"I'm looking for the theater. I'd like to check Helen's alibi."

"Horsefeathers," Mara sneered.

"You're dating yourself. There it is."

*The Fleet's In*, they read. *Bring on the Girls*. Adults, 35c. Kids, 20c.

PETER studied the posters and the pretty blonde girl in the glass cage. "What days do you change the bill?" he asked.

"Sundays, Tuesdays, and Fridays. Two?"

"Please." Peter fumbled with his billfold. "I guess we missed the picture Miss Herrick recommended." He sounded properly regretful. "A documentary film."

"I know the one you mean," the girl nodded. "It was on with the Fred MacMurray picture. Miss Herrick saw it the first night."

"Do you have the old schedule there?" He slid a large bill into the cage and smiled disarmingly.

"Yes sir." While she made change Peter studied the typewritten program.

"Thanks. We're traveling," he explained, "so perhaps we can catch it somewhere else."

"Stupid!" Mara hissed as they entered the foyer. "She'll tell Helen."

"I wish I could be sure of that. Let's sit way over here."

There were crushed toes and indignant exclamations as the tall professor and the tall girl crowded through to seats on the far end of the row.

"What now?" Mara whispered.

"Nothing for a few minutes."

The little theater had no air conditioning and the plush seats were hot and dusty. Peter felt Mara squirm uncomfortably. Apparently the villagers felt the same way; there were not more than twenty-five people in the house.

At the end of a very unfunny cartoon Peter felt for Mara's hand. "Come on," he murmured. "We're leaving." Crouching low, he pulled her through to the side

aisle and out through heavy velours curtains onto a dimly lighted stoop. Eight steps took them down into a passageway which connected with a deserted alley. Five minutes later they were back in the car.

"I see what you mean," Mara said. "It isn't such a hot alibi."

"I like it better than Elizabeth Cready's," Peter answered mildly. "A fair alibi always looks better to me than one that's too pat. And I had to ask for Helen's."

"What did you learn from the old schedule?"

"The hours were all right. The first feature went on at seven-fourteen and the documentary film was over at eleven-eighteen. If she stayed in the theater, it covers all of the critical time."

"If she stayed."

"She probably did. Peggy Ann was with her, remember. Hey! There's our messy little bar," Peter nodded. "Let's go over and buy something to jog the Mariner's memory."

"Mine too."

The neon sign still advertised Air Conditioning and the flies still clung to the dirty screen, but at night the odd bird looked more like a pelican. Three men, smelling strongly of fish, sat huddled over beer bottles, and two ladies of questionable virtue reclined in one of the booths waiting for business to pick up. The bartender in the soiled apron had been replaced by a slatternly woman. Her Collineses were not up to standard. After one drink Peter bought a pint of bourbon and they walked out into the fresher air of the street.

"Let's walk," Peter suggested. "It's only across the coast road and up there a little way. We're early for the Mariner."

"Good. It smells nice, doesn't it?" Mara linked her arm through his. "Kelpy and damp."

It was farther than Peter had thought. His watch showed ten-fifteen when they started out onto the pier, guided by the beam from the little flashlight.

"No Mariner," he remarked when they reached the end of the walk. "We should have brought the car, I guess."

"He hasn't gone home," Mara pointed out. "His lines are still there. Let's wait around awhile." She sat on the pier and hung her legs over, resting her folded arms on the bottom rail. "Ah! this is more

like it," she breathed. "No Jane, no murder, no nothing. It's a glorious night."

"So the natives think." Peter sat down beside her and kissed her arm. "Practically every boat in town is out."

A small launch cut close to the pier and a shout of young laughter could be heard above the noise of the motor. There were even a couple of kayaks near the shore, and once the lights from a boat picked up a party of bathers.

PETER lit cigarettes and stared across the water toward the dark bulk of the Tor. His thoughts were engaged with the murder of Jane Titus, and they were not happy thoughts. Crime detection without the wizardry of the modern crime laboratory became a primitive sort of guessing game. One was thrown back upon the questionable judgment of the investigator and the often fallacious interpretations which he placed upon circumstantial evidence. One small detail in the murder of Jane Titus kept nipping at Ponsonby's memory with the persistence of a mosquito. Peter slapped at it with the strong hand of reason and it went away.

Resolutely he began to work out a time plan for Jane from four o'clock on Friday—when she had stopped at Helen Herick's house—until ten or eleven, when her dead body was left, half concealed, beneath the brush of the Tor. Unwillingly Peter's eyes went back to the tree-spiked point of land. An ugly suspicion was taking form and he didn't like it. It pointed toward a thoroughly nice person. Peter didn't want to trap a thoroughly nice person. He wanted to go on naively thinking that murderers were vicious and a menace to society. With an impatient sigh he turned to Mara. In the faint moonlight he saw the flash of her smile.

"You know who killed Jane, don't you?" she asked with alarming prescience. "And it's the wrong person."

"No," he answered honestly. "I don't know. But I'm afraid. It all hinges on a little thing, but it's a little thing that keeps coming back to annoy me. When you're forced to solve a mystery on the basis of character rather than by scientific methods, little things get out of proportion. At least for me they do."

"Let's forget about Jane," Mara sug-

gested. "For these few minutes while we're waiting let's pretend there wasn't any murder and that we're having the pleasant sort of week end we expected. Kiss me, Peter."

Peter kissed her thoroughly.

"That's better," she sighed. "Sometimes I think you talk too much. You should—"

Peter's lips stopped whatever observation she was about to make. It was very pleasant to forget about Jane.

A largish boat putt-putted out of the dark and swung a spotlight along the pier. The beam picked up Mara's delectable legs, and male voices were loud in approval.

"Competition," Peter sighed, releasing her. "Even out here."

"Let's see what I'm attracting," Mara suggested. She thrust her face between the bars of the guardrail and swung her feet invitingly. The boat circled, leaving a pale phosphorescent wake, and played the light over the pier again.

Mara saw the body first.

The light struck the clear still water, flicked up to the two figures on the pier, and disappeared as the boat chugged away.

"Peter!" Mara whispered. "Did you see it?"

"Um-hmn. Nice boat."

"No! In the water."

A familiar urgency in Mara's voice sent Ponsonby scrambling to his feet. "Who is it?"

"I can't tell. Give me the flashlight." Lying flat on her stomach, she turned the ribbon down into the bay.

"The Mariner," Peter said quietly. "Fouled in his own lines."

"An accident, maybe?" Mara asked hopefully.

Peter's laugh was short and harsh. "When we're on our way to talk to him? I doubt it. Come on, let's get out of here. You're growing too adept at uncovering bodies."

The boat was circling for another swing past the pier. "I think those boys saw it too," Mara whispered. "They're coming back."

For a second Peter and Mara were caught in the bright light like two moths; there was a shout from the boat, and then Peter and Mara were running down the pier toward the road, their heels pounding hollowly against the old boards.



"LISTEN!" Peter caught Mara to him and strained to hear something beside the frantic beating of their two hearts.

"The motor's stopped," Mara whispered.

Seconds later other feet hammered on the rotting planks.

"They're off to sound the alarm," Peter said. "Damn it, I wish we had the car!"

"Hindsight. What do we do?"

"Run like hell." He took her hand in his and set off at a loping run.

"I'm too old for this," Mara gasped. "Could we hook a ride?"

"And have more people to identify us? No." But he slackened his pace. They kept to the inland side of the highway, stepping into the shrubby growth when the headlights of oncoming cars picked them out. A roadster with four boys in it came from behind them, roared past, and disappeared.

In less than fifteen minutes Peter and Mara reached Cyprus Avenue and saw the red light of a police car sweep around the curve. The siren rose to a high whine as it passed the cowering figures of a middle-aged English professor and a tall beautiful woman.

"Fugitives," Peter said dramatically. "I never thought I'd be the object of a man hunt."

"You aren't," Mara snapped. "Amos is after the body of the Mariner."

"That's right," Peter said brightly. "I'd forgotten. Well, we have one advantage over the police: we know where they are, and that's more than they can say of us."

"Amos certainly works fast," Mara panted. "How did those boys get to him so quickly?"

"How should I know? Maybe they carry walkie-talkies or signal with flags or something."

"Smarty." Mara slowed down and inhaled deeply to steady her quivering breath.

They turned up the street toward the air-conditioned bar with the odd bird hanging over the screen door and stopped to stare. The car was gone.

"The car's gone," Peter said unnecessarily.

"I can see that. But why?"

"Why? Why? Why?" Peter gritted. "I don't know! I parked in front of that hydrant; maybe they pick cars up for that."

"They probably do," Mara snapped back.

"They seem to highly efficient." Her anger was short-lived. "Peter," she said quietly, "that car could get us into a lot of trouble."

"Don't you suppose I thought of that? There's the sandy spade and my wet shirt and the bloody handkerchief I had around my ankle. The first thing we know Amos will think I did it."

"And our one little clue," Mara added dolefully, "is in the glove compartment along with half a bottle of swell bourbon."

Peter wiped sand, dust, and sweat from his hot face. "I have a feeling," he sighed, "that we aren't doing so well. Come on, the law is breathing down our necks."

Ten long dark blocks lay between the bar with the zoological monstrosity and the Graysons' house. Peter and Mara trudged them in weary silence. The clock in the hall struck twelve as they mounted the steps.

"Did you get your prescription?" Ken asked unkindly. "And what happened to your car?"

"Your guess is as good as ours." Peter sank down beside Mara in the swing and watched enviously as she kicked off her shoes. "We left it downtown in front of a bar and walked over to the pier to talk to the Mariner. A boat threw a spot on the water and Mara discovered the Mariner's body. He'd been wrapped in his lines and drowned."

Ken swore softly and buried his face in his hands. "It isn't possible!" he said finally, and in the light from the living room his eyes were haggard. "This has to stop, Peter!"

Peter nodded gravely. "I agree with you. It's high time you people turned this thing over to the police. As a matter of fact," he added, "I think they will get in touch with you. We were seen on the pier tonight, and even a halfway smart policeman should ask a few questions."

"What became of your car?" Ken asked again.

"I parked it in front of a hydrant, and when we came back it was gone. I suppose the police picked it up."

"They don't haul in every car that's parked wrong. Where did you leave it?"

"In front of the bar with the funny bird." He laid the pint bottle on the table. "We wanted this for the Mariner. When we came back from the pier the car was gone."



Ken rose with a sigh. "Come on," he ordered, "let's look for it."

"I'm going with you," Mara insisted. "Amos Schroeder knows that the Mariner is dead and he's got a description of us. I don't want to be here alone when the law shows up with a short length of rubber hose."

"Don't be absurd. This isn't Los Angeles, Ken reminded her. "All Amos will do tonight is to recover the Mariner's body. In any event, he wouldn't suspect you and Pete, because you're our guests."

"ALL RIGHT NOW," Ken commanded when the car was on the street. "Show me the route you took."

"Down Cyprus. I'll show you." Peter watched the dark houses and the feeble arc lights go by. Funny how short the distance seemed in a car. He stretched his tired legs and yawned. Six blocks, seven, eight...

"There!" Peter pointed an accusing finger at the bar with the strange bird. "I parked it right in front of that hydrant. It's gone." He folded his arms and smiled a small and complacent smile.

"Why were you parked across the street?" Ken asked. "Why were you headed east?"

"We'd been to the movie first. Over there." He waved his hand languidly toward a furniture store. "Say! Where's the movie house?"

Ken raced his motor viciously. "Sometimes," he snapped, "I wonder if you have good sense." He roared to the corner, turned one block south, and came up in front of the dark and deserted theater. Peter's car stood across from the lighted bar. The neon sign still advertised Air Conditioning and over the door was a bird which was unmistakably a pelican.

"There you are," Ken said sourly. "Right where you left it."

"Two bars with birds," Peter apologized. "I hadn't thought of that. Thanks a lot, Ken."

"You're welcome," Ken gritted. "And I hope you have a ticket for parking in front of a hydrant." He gunned the car and drove away with a raucous rasping of gears.

Temper, temper! Peter thought regretfully, and climbed under the steering

wheel. There was no ticket. Gratefully he backed out and followed the winking tail-light ahead of him.

They followed Ken's car home in silence and parked behind it. Ken had already gone in; Mara dodged upstairs while Peter went out to the kitchen where he found Ken.

Mara entered. "Ken seems to be the sleuth in the party," she observed. "I'm glad you found the car, Peter."

"What happened to you?" He was glad to see that Ken had opened the Mariner's bottle and was making highballs.

"Nothing. But just in case, I assumed disguise number 37, since my legs had occasioned some comment from the boys. The police didn't come, so my efforts were wasted." She walked out into the light from the living-room windows, and the men saw that she had donned slacks and that her feet seemed unusually large.

"You didn't have to overdo it," Peter said critically. "Where did you get the shoes?" They were muddy and hideously flat.

"From the back porch. Are they yours, Ken?"

"They were. Garden shoes. You might as well know, Mara, that this disillusions me completely. I'm throwing away my torch."

"Ah well!" Mara sighed. "I still have Peter."

Peter scowled at her feet. "Don't be too sure of that." He accepted a glass and stared into the darkness, trying to see the shadow which was Ken Grayson. "What do you make of the Mariner's death?" he asked finally.

The shadow moved restlessly. "He must have seen whoever was with Jane on Friday."

"Um-hmn. But how did the murderer know that we planned to question the Mariner?"

Small and belligerent as a terrier, Ken sprang into the light. "What the hell are you suggesting?" he asked with controlled fury. "Do you think I am a party to anything that may have happened to Jane Titus?"

PETER chuckled softly. "Simmer down," he suggested. "You knew we wanted to see the Mariner; did you pass on the information to anyone else?"

"I did not!"

"Not even Allie?"

"Particularly not Allie."

"So? Why not?"

"Allie is a good sister and I'm very fond of her," Ken said truculently. "But she talks too much. She'd tell Helen and Helen would tell Jim."

"Ah!" Peter purred. "But Jim isn't the murderer, is he?"

Ken twisted away and sat down in the darkness. "I don't know. Not any more. I'm not sure of anything." His voice sounded muffled.

"But I thought Jim's innocence was the one indisputable fact in this whole screwy business," Peter said mildly.

"So did I until"—there was an uptilted glass and the rattle of ice before Ken continued—"I went off and did a little investigating of my own this afternoon," he admitted. "I went to the Mariner's house."

The porch rocked. "Scooped!" Peter bellowed. "Scooped by one of my own teachers!" More quietly he asked, "What did you learn?"

Ken rubbed his face wearily. "He told me substantially the same things that he told you last night. He was coy about it, just as you said. I quizzed him about what he saw when the boat went past the end of the pier, and he finally admitted that he hadn't seen Jane. He assumed she was inside. The person at the wheel was tall, the Mariner said, and—and wore white trousers."

"So what?"

"Jim York is the only person in the crowd who can afford the luxury of whites," Ken said miserably. "The rest of us make out with dark flannels and more practical summer clothes. That sort of ties, doesn't it?"

"No. Women wear slacks," Peter reminded him, "and at a distance it isn't always easy to distinguish sex."

Ken shook his head. "These women don't wear slacks. You don't know small towns, Pete. Especially small college towns. It isn't considered good form."

"I've seen George in pants," Mara said suddenly. "She was wearing clamdiggers this morning."

"That's for gardening," Ken explained. "She wouldn't go outside the yard in them, though."

"Don't any of them own slacks?" Peter persisted.

"Not that I've ever seen. Long ago, when she first came here, Martha used to wear white ducks over her bathing suit, but Helen and Alicia advised her not to do it. They were afraid she would be criticized."

Peter snorted derisively. "And white ducks over a feminine derriere wouldn't look like 'white trousers,' anyway. How about Helen Herrick?"

Ken's voice was shocked. "She'd consider them unladylike."

"I wouldn't take it too hard," Peter said easily. "This is probably just one more attempt on the part of the murderer to throw suspicion on Jim."

"Then why," Ken asked, "did he kill the Mariner? Why didn't the murderer let the old fellow tell his story and incriminate Jim? I mean..."

"Yes," Peter said slowly. "Yes, I see exactly what you mean."

OUT of the mouths of babes... Peter Ponsonby sat alone on the dark porch and heard the living-room clock chime three. A lovely middle-of-the-night breeze stirred the honeysuckle vines, spreading a spicy scent.

Out of the mouths of babes... Ken Grayson had put his finger on it. Why, indeed, should the murderer have killed the Mariner? Unless, of course, Jim York was the murderer. Peter knew better. When he said to himself, *Jim York murdered his stepdaughter*, it was like saying, *The earth is flat*. The statement of an absurdity.

Peter lit a cigarette and ground it out. His mouth was dry and burned. Claspings his hands behind his aching head, he stared at the clear sky and thought about Jim York. He saw him—dark, smiling, assured—moving from his precious house to the little Tudor building on the campus. He saw his exquisitely tailored suits and the gleaming car. Without experience he knew how Jim would stand before his classes, bending on each student his earnest gaze, mouthing fine-sounding phrases in his soft, pseudo-Oxonian accents. He went with him in thought along his daily paths and knew that he knew Jim York, the teacher and the poet. Jim York was not a mur-

derer. He was an exceedingly cautious man who would not by a look or a word jeopardize his hold on position, power, and wealth. Peter dismissed him.

Then why had the murderer killed the Mariner? Why had someone who had carefully limned a trail to York's door suddenly become afraid? What was it about the white trousers that pointed *not* to Jim York but to the real murderer?

Doggedly, Peter went back to the moment on the Tor when he had moved Jane's body out into the light of the burning torch.

#### XIV

**YOU COULD TELL** it was Monday morning. It was apparent as soon as you stepped out of the cool overnight quiet of the house. The people on the street looked different: they ran to levis and bobby socks. Occasionally a harassed man walked by clutching a bulging brief case. Peter Ponsonby stood on the porch and watched the stream move east on Cyprus, up the hill to the college. Jalopies honked raucously and nudged sedate faculty cars out of the way; bicycle bells trilled. Peter sighed and resented his inactivity. Hudson would be teaching his own nine-o'clock class in Contemporary Poetry right now. Peter could smell the hot odor of eucalyptus, see the half a hundred blank pleasant faces of his students, feel the sticky varnish of his big chair. Suddenly, irrationally, he hated Hudson.

The back-door screen slammed and a moment later Ken's car coughed down the driveway.

"Gone for the day?" Peter called.

"No, I'm through at eleven. See you then." Ken waved and backed into the street.

When the car was out of sight Peter went over to George Fawcett's house. She was awake, because the sprinkler revolved slowly on the badminton court and the air was rich with the smell of good strong coffee. Alicia, Peter thought wistfully, did not make good coffee. Perhaps it was one reason why Wallace Fawcett had preferred George.

"Hi!" he shouted. "Do you have a hand-out for an unemployed teacher?"

"Come in, Peter." George looked more

feminine in a crisp house coat, her thick graying hair tied up with a blue bow. "What will you have?"

"Just coffee, please." He sat opposite her in the nook and watched the efficient way in which she moved from cupboard to stove. "What do you know about the Mariner?" he asked abruptly.

"The Mariner?" She put the percolator on the table and sat down behind a bowl of cereal and fruit. "Well, you've seen him. He's a nasty old man and he's lived here for sixty years or more. He's a Character—with a capital C—and something of a nuisance. He spends his evenings on the pier—as you know—and I suspect that his days pass quietly and uneventfully under a moldy rock. Why?"

"If you're acting," Peter sighed, "the stage missed a second Duse. Is that all you have to tell me?"

"Certainly. Did you think he was some particular friend of mine?"

"I hoped not. Someone wrapped him up in his lines last night and drowned him in the bay."

"Oh, Peter!" George pushed her breakfast away untasted. "The poor old man! Why?"

Women always wanted to know Why, Peter thought irritably. "Because he saw too much," he answered shortly. "Do you remember my telling you that I wanted to talk to him again?"

"Yes," she nodded eagerly. "Did you have a chance?"

"No. Did you tell anyone that I intended to see him?"

"No one. Whom would I tell?" she asked reasonably. "And for what reason?" Having recovered from her initial shock, she pulled the cereal back and sensibly began to eat. "Then we'll never know what the Mariner saw," she observed. She didn't sound unhappy about it.

"He saw the person who went off with Jane in the boat Friday night. He described him to Ken yesterday afternoon." Peter's blue eyes were probing George's face.

"Oh, Peter!" she said again. "Was it—Ken didn't—"

"No, Ken didn't kill the Mariner," Peter smiled.

"But, Peter, if someone would kill the Mariner because of something he saw on Friday night, then that must mean that

Jane has been—that Jane is—” Words failed her, and for the second time she pushed her dish away.

“Make up your mind, George,” Peter snapped. “Are you going to eat your breakfast or not?”

“It doesn’t look so good. Peter, what did the Mariner see?”

“Not Jane. She must have been inside or on the floor,” Peter answered slowly. “The Mariner saw someone tall standing at the wheel; someone in white trousers.”

Breath went out of George in a tired moan. “Then it was Jim,” she whispered.

“Where did they go?”

“You’ll know as soon as anyone,” Peter said evasively. It wasn’t easy to lie to George. He changed the subject quickly. “Where did you go yesterday afternoon, George?”

THE intelligent hazel eyes were steady but George flushed uncomfortably. “Out to the Tor. Allie and I were doing some sleuthing on our own.” Unexpectedly she began to giggle.

“Don’t go hysterical on me,” Peter warned. “I’ll slap and I’ll slap hard.”

“It won’t be necessary.” She drank a cup of hot coffee and lit a cigarette. “After I talked with you yesterday I got to thinking about Jane going off in the boat and I recalled Mara’s question about swimming ashore to picnic and I realized the Tor was the only possible place she could have gone that night. So after lunch I went over and asked Allie if they had searched the Tor on Saturday. They had. Four of them. But I wasn’t satisfied. I made Allie go out with me and show me what they had done.” She frowned unhappily. “They had done a bang-up job, Peter. They divided the headland into four strips and worked from the highway to the water. Allie and I went all over it again, not very hopefully, but I think maybe we found something that wasn’t there on Saturday.”

“A clue?” Peter smiled. His face felt stiff.

“Perhaps. Do you know what I think, Peter?” She leaned over the table and her eyes were wide. “I think there is—something—buried out there on the point.”

Peter simulated surprise. “You do. Why?”

“Well, we found a lot of stones and a

big piece of driftwood,” George explained. “They were all spread out in a line, and it was much too far inland for them to have been left by the tide. I mean, they stand out like a sore thumb to anyone who knows this beach.”

“Really?” Peter said happily. “I must tell Mara. Did you investigate?”

“Mercy, no!” George shuddered. “It’s probably only the work of picnickers, but Allie and I thought you should look into it. Will you, Peter?”

“I will,” he promised. “How do I find the place?”

“It’s right beneath a scrubby little pine,” George said. “You can’t miss it.”

“Probably not,” Peter said humbly.

He helped himself to a second cup of the excellent coffee. “George,” he asked, “did you talk to Jane on Friday? Can you throw any light on her movements that day? Do you know of anyone who was at her house?”

George wrinkled her brow thoughtfully.

“I saw her on Thursday,” she recalled, “and I saw her park her car in front of Helen’s on Friday afternoon about four or four-thirty. I was talking to Helen later, over in Allie’s kitchen, and Helen said that Jane said something about a supper party on Sunday if it wasn’t too hot. She mentioned that Jane had been at Jim’s and that she’d brought some flowers. I believe that is all I know about it, Peter.”

“Can you recall hearing if anyone went out to her place?” he insisted.

“No.” George seemed very sure. “I know I didn’t,” she smiled. “And Helen has no car. The Creadys haven’t, either, and Allie doesn’t drive. I wouldn’t know about Jim,” she added quietly, “because he lives right beyond the Tituses. Does that help any?”

“It helps a lot. Well, I have work to do. So long for now.” He left before the temptation to take her into his confidence overcame his discretion.

He knew it was a police car the minute he stepped out onto the porch. It smelled of police, from the whip aerial waving in the air to the neat license plate with the telltale E. Just as the man standing on the curb smelled of police. Not the one in uniform, but the one cleaning his fingernails with a pocketknife.

"Good morning," Peter said pleasantly, opening the Graysons' gate. "Looking for someone? A tall man and a woman with beautiful legs, for instance?"

Amos Schroeder smiled and nodded. Before he could speak Alicia came running down from the porch, her dark eyes snapping. "This is absolutely idiotic, Amos," she hissed. "Everybody in the neighborhood is watching!"

"They've seen me call here before, Allie." His smile was soft and cozening.

"But not officially," she retorted. "I'll see that we have a new police captain in this town if it's the last thing I ever do!"

"Oh, come, now! You've been threatening that for years, but you never do anything about it. Aren't you going to introduce me?" Schroeder asked gently.

"Come into the house," Allie snapped, "and tell that fool Parker boy to drive away from my curb." She pattered up the walk, every step an indignant protest.

Amos Schroeder jerked his head and the uniformed policeman got into the car. Along the street lace curtains fell back into place.

**B**EHIND the welcome privacy of the honeysuckle vines Alicia stood and tapped her small foot. "Now," she demanded, "say whatever's on your mind, Amos, and then let us get on with our business."

"What are you all worked up about?" Amos asked mildly. "I dropped in to meet the professor here, and I wouldn't mind some iced tea or a coke if you have it, Allie." He selected a comfortable chair and laid his hat on the floor. "Sit down, Dr. Ponsonby," he said hospitably.

Peter sat down.

Schroeder settled back and lit a cigarette. "It's been a long time," he smiled, "since I've talked to any faculty except our own at the college. I graduated right here myself, and then I was up at Berkeley for a couple of years. Do you happen to know Bergen? I had two courses from him in Non-Dramatic Elizabethan Literature. I thought he was an excellent man."

"He is. You have some very fine English professors right here, too."

"Yes. Particularly Cready, I understand. I'm afraid I don't keep up with that sort of thing," he apologized, "like I

should. Dr. York is a good man. I had courses with him."

"Then you and Ken must have gone to school together," Peter guessed.

Schroeder smiled shyly. "No," he said, "I was in Allie's class originally, but I had to stop school for several years. When I went back Allie was already librarian and Jim was teaching."

There was no hint of recognition in the steely blue eyes. There was nothing there at all, in fact, except a polite interest. They kept up the pointless conversation until Allie came out with iced tea and doughnuts.

Then Schroeder said, "Are you too busy to spare me a few minutes this morning, Professor?"

"Of course not. What's the matter?"

"Come right out with whatever's on your mind, Amos," Alicia ordered. "Don't beat about the bush."

"Sour milk," Schroeder said appreciatively. "You always did make fine doughnuts, Allie." He took a second one. "But not coffee. You make the worst coffee of any woman in town."

Peter thought very highly of Schroeder suddenly. "What did you want me for?" he asked.

"Well, we found a fisherman drowned off the end of the pier last night," Amos said placidly. "Probably an accident; the Mariner was old and unsteady."

"The Mariner?" Allie gasped. "Drowned? The poor old man!"

"Some boys in a boat found him," Schroeder continued, "and they tell a tall tale of a man and a woman acting real peculiar. The description fitted the professor."

Alicia's voice was ominous. "*Our guests*," she said, "were right here all evening. Do you understand, Amos?"

Peter sighed. It didn't pay to lie to the police, he had discovered.

"I expect they were, Allie," Amos said comfortably. "However, I'll let the boys look at Dr. Ponsonby and the young lady if you don't mind. The kids will see that they are mistaken and I can look for another pair."

"*I do mind*," Allie snapped. "I won't forget this, Amos."

"Skip it, Alicia," Peter cautioned. "I'll call Miss Mallory," he told Schroeder.

"You needn't. I'm up and dressed." The Mara who stepped from the house bore slight resemblance to the girl who had dangled delectable legs from the pier's edge. She wore slacks to hide her best feature, and other good points were lost in a too-large sweater. She wore dark glasses and her face was innocent of make-up.

THE RIDE to the police station was uneventful. Amos Schroeder made no allusion to their earlier meeting but talked steadily about local landmarks and the village. He instructed Peter to park behind the small brick building and led them into a pleasant office.

"This is all very routine," he smiled deprecatingly. "But I'm supposed to do what I can. Sanders, bring in young Joe Ferguson."

A self-conscious boy stepped into the room and stared curiously at the tall professor. For the drab female at his side he had only a quick glance, devoid of interest.

"Well, Joe," Amos said simply, "these are the only strangers in town. They the folks you saw last night?"

A puzzled expression crossed the boy's face. "I don't know," he answered slowly. "I only saw them at a distance, and they look like the people on the pier—in a way. But the girl last night"—his voice warmed with enthusiasm—"the one we saw..." Words failed him and he lapsed into an embarrassed silence. "I guess it was a couple of other guys," he finished lamely.

"All right." Amos waved his hand negligently. "Get on back to your classes. Thanks a lot."

Mara smiled at Peter. She looked very self-satisfied.

"Sanders," Amos repeated, "let Martin come in for a minute."

It was the boy from the hot-dog stand. He grinned at Peter and Mara and nodded to Amos Schroeder.

"Ever see this couple before, Mart?" Schroeder asked.

"Sure thing. They had a hot dog at my place night before last just as I was closing up."

"Is that the only time you saw them?"

"No, they were on the pier one noon, and last night they walked out to the end."

"What time?"

"A little after ten."

"Hm. You couldn't be mistaken, I suppose?"

"I don't think so, Amos. This is the man, all right. And I think it's the same girl if she'd take off the cheaters." His smile was impudent.

"O.K., get back on the campus."

When they were alone Schroeder waved them into chairs and sat behind his desk. "Looks like either Allie or young Martin made a mistake, doesn't it?" He took his knife from his pocket, studied his nails critically, and put the knife away.

"Martin saw us, all right," Peter nodded. "I suppose Alicia was just trying to spare us embarrassment."

"Probably. I guess that's why she suggested that a beautiful woman like Miss Mallory get herself up in those clothes." Amos nodded agreeably. "Well," he sighed, "Allie always means well." He tilted back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his neck. "Any proof yet as to who murdered Jane Titus?" he asked conversationally.

"No."

"Your idea to circulate that story about her being in Del Monte?"

Peter blushed guiltily. "Could be."

Schroeder's smile was brief and patronizing. "Half a dozen folks will smell that one out before noon," he chided. "It was really too corny. Bessie Pritchard—she's the postmistress—called me up as soon as she heard it and wanted to know what was going on around town. Said she knew for a fact there hadn't been a special delivery for anyone Jane knew on Saturday or Sunday, and her friend Mame Dodd—she's in the telegraph office—said the only telegram was the one saying the Tukes girl had a baby boy. Seven pound, six ounces," he threw in gratuitously. "Bessie and Mame asked the telephone operator to check long-distance calls, and the last one that came through was yours to Ken Grayson. The girls," he concluded, "wanted to know where Jane really was."

"The girls," Peter said acidly, "are all anti-Yorks, I suppose."

"Huhn? Oh yes," Schroeder nodded. "They hate his—They don't like him. They think he poisoned his wife."

Peter sighed loudly and studied the



clean floor. "It that what you hauled us in for?" he asked finally.

"No. We made a sort of gentleman's agreement the other evening, Professor. Least I took it that way. You were to work inside the college circle and I was to handle the rest of the town. So far as I know, the Mariner wasn't one of the York crowd. You had a lead there. You bungled it and the old man was killed. What did he have to tell you?"

QUICKLY Peter sorted through the scraps of evidence in his possession. "He saw Jane Friday night," he said carefully. "He saw her get on the *Sprite* about nine and head south. The boat was still out when he went home. That's all."

The police chief made no comment. "Figured out yet where Jane was hung?" he asked instead.

"From the davit over the boat."

Schroeder nodded thoughtfully. "I guessed as much, but I didn't want to attract attention by going out there." There was a muffled groan from Mara. "Any clues?"

"One. We have a flake of metal that we dug out of the piling. Probably the noose was held back by a staple. The murderer broke his knife, or whatever he used, when he dug out the staple."

"Good." Schroeder nodded admiringly. "You sure know your business. Well"—he rose, terminating the interview—"just carry on, except next time you better let us handle people like the Mariner. By the way, do you know if Jane was wearing any jewelry on Friday night?"

Smug satisfaction swelled Peter's troubled breast. "No," he lied. "I'd like to ask a question too: how did you learn of the Mariner's death?"

For an instant the chief's eyes were bright with approval and then he veiled them with his long lashes. "I received an anonymous phone call at ten-thirty last night."

"Could you trace it?"

"Only to the pay booth in the Rialto drugstore. The phones are in the arcade between the drugstore and the hotel; the cashier can't see them."

"Man or woman who called?"

"Sanders took the call," Schroeder shrugged. "He says the voice was distorted,

probably by something put over the mouthpiece, and it was hardly more than a whisper, anyway. The party said, '*End of the pier. Murder.*' That's all."

"Murder," Peter repeated softly. His expression was compounded of relief, regret and resolution. "Thanks," he said absently. "Thanks a lot."

"I LIKE that man," Mara said, taking off the dark glasses and applying lipstick with a lavish hand. "No wonder Allie adores him. He's as sharp as tacks."

"Does she?"

"Of course, stupid. She picks on him all the time. I love the way he's letting us do his spade work."

"As Jim York remarked, it keeps my hand in. Let's see what's troubling Mark Cready." Peter swung the car north on a tree-bordered lane. "Allie said he phoned last night while we were out."

He pulled up in front of a shabby cottage with a sagging fence and a gate which had to be lifted into place. Remembering Mark's beautiful hands, he understood the condition of the property.

"Looks run-down, doesn't it?" Mara said critically. "It's a cute little place if someone would just go hog-wild with nails and a hammer." She nodded toward a shutter that hung askew.

"Mark's probably on campus," Peter remembered belatedly, and moved the hingeless gate.

Elizabeth opened the door on a room which was exquisite and immaculate, in contrast to the garden. "Hello," she smiled. "Did you want to see Mark?"

"We wanted to see both of you," Peter said tactfully. "You have a charming home." He meant it. He looked with appreciation at the book-lined walls, the worn chairs and well-placed reading lamps.

"Like George," Elizabeth noted, "we go in for comfort. Please sit down." She led them to chairs grouped around a cobbler's bench. Crisp curtains ballooned away from shining windowpanes, and the air was sweet with the honeysuckle which distinguished the community.

"Have you talked with Jane?" Elizabeth asked as soon as they were seated. "Peggy Ann Larsen said Clive had heard from her."

"I'm sorry," Peter sighed, "but it isn't



true. We circulated that story to squash the village gossip."

Elizabeth's face settled back into the familiar lines of worry. "I hoped it was all cleared up," she said wearily. "Are you any nearer to knowing where she is?"

"Yes. Do you mind going back over that business of the phone call on Friday evening, Mrs. Cready?"

"Not at all." She crossed trim ankles and folded her hands quietly in her lap. After Alicia's ever-busy knitting needles it was pleasant to see a woman rest.

"As I told you before, I think," she began, "Mark went out just before six."

She hadn't mentioned it before, and Peter stiffened in his chair. "Where did he go?"

Elizabeth shrugged lightly. "To the corner to phone Jane, I imagine. I heard him tell you he phoned her about then. He was back here by a quarter after and we had our dinner. Afterwards Mark sat over there"—she nodded toward a littered desk—"and worked on papers while I did up the dishes. Then Jeanie—that's our helper—was shelling walnuts, so I came in here and sat."

"It must have been along about eight-thirty when the phone rang. That was the second time it had rung since dinner," she explained. "The first time it was Helen Herrick wanting the loan of my pressure canner, and the second time—at eight-thirty—it was Jane." She wrinkled her plain face in an unbecoming scowl. "At least, I assumed it was Jane."

"Would Jane's voice be familiar to you over the phone?" Mara asked.

"Oh yes, we've talked often. But this time she sounded terribly agitated. It was hardly more than a whisper. She just said, '*Let me speak to Mark.*' I called him to the phone and I went out into the kitchen. When I came back later he was standing on the porch in the dark, smoking. Neither one of us made any reference to the phone call, naturally. A few minutes later he said he was off to his meeting. That's all."

"Then you couldn't positively identify the voice over the phone as Jane's?" Peter asked.

"No."

"Could you be sure it was a woman speaking?" Mara asked.

"N-no, although I think it was," Eliza-

beth said slowly. "What has happened, Dr. Ponsonby?"

Peter rose abruptly and patted her shoulder. "You mustn't worry," he said kindly. "By the way, when were you last at the Tituses'?"

"Oh dear," she said ruefully, "it's been several weeks. Mark and I drove out one night last month with George."

"Don't worry," Peter said again. "Everything's going to be all right. Is Mark on campus? I want to talk to him."

"Yes. He has no eleven o'clock, if you want to go up there now. He's in the English building, room two fourteen."

"Thanks. And don't worry."

MARK CREADY came out to meet them. "The office is full of students," he explained. "Elizabeth phoned me you were on your way."

Peter said, "Were you trying to reach me last night?"

"Yes," Mark nodded. "I thought of something that might be important. Then someone told us Jane had been heard from, so what I had to say wasn't important after all."

"Did Elizabeth tell you that we just spread that story to give us more time?"

Mark nodded again, soberly. "Yes. I'm sorry. I hoped it was true. I wanted to tell you—"

"About the eight-thirty phone call?" Peter cut in.

Mark's face was surprised. "Yes. How did you know?"

"Never mind. Go ahead."

"It was made from a pay phone," Mark informed him. "That isn't important, perhaps, because Jane frequently went out to call me—but, Dr. Ponsonby, if she was alone in a phone booth somewhere, why was she so agitated?"

Peter sighed and rubbed his face. "She didn't call you," he answered finally. "Jane kept her appointment with you on the *Sprite* at nine o'clock."

"But I wasn't there. I went up on the campus and—"

"I know. Someone else met her at the boat. Someone who *knew* about your date, who phoned you so you would stay away. Have you any idea who it would be, Mark?"

"No. I assumed I was speaking to Jane."

"Who could have known about your date with her?"

Mark ruffled his curls and scowled like a worried angel. "Elizabeth could guess. I didn't tell anyone, and I'm sure Jane wouldn't."

Peter switched suddenly to a new line of inquiry. "Who in your crowd hates Jim York?" he asked.

Mark's dark-fringed eyes opened wide. "Why, no one," he answered. "We all admire him tremendously."

Peter could hear Mara grinding her teeth. "All right," he said shortly, "so the man's a saint. Isn't there *someone* with some grievance against him?" There was a hint of desperation in Peter's voice.

Mark's smile broke with cherubic radiance. "I see what you mean," he nodded. "The only person who could have any grudge would be me. He's told me I'm to move on next term. Does that help any?"

"No," Peter howled. "It doesn't help one damned bit! Here." He extracted one of his cards from his billfold. "Come down to L.A. one week end soon. We'll work out something."

Mark turned the card over and stared at it as though the scrap of paper represented a last-minute stay of execution. "Thanks, Dr. Ponsonby." His voice was husky. "This will mean so much to Elizabeth. But I always get into trouble, you know," he said honestly. "You probably won't want me long."

Peter Ponsonby looked at Mark as though a generation separated them instead of half a dozen years. "Let's wait and see," he said ambiguously. "I have a hunch your troublesome years are about over." He stepped on the starter and gunned the motor gently. "Yes sir," he said with a grim smile, "I wouldn't be surprised if you grew up."

It was when they drove down the hill that Peter first noticed the man in the Ford sedan following him.

## XV

**K**EN HAD CHANGED into shorts and was pushing the lawn mower back and forth across the bright green lawn. Where he had finished, a fan-shaped sprinkler shot silver splinters into the air. It was all serene and peaceful. Peter

sighed, thinking how soon the idyll was to be shattered.

"Anything new?" Ken asked.

"Quite a lot," Peter nodded. "Come up on the porch."

"If you boys will excuse me I'll get into some decent clothes," Mara grinned. "Disguise number 527 was a flop."

"Where's Candy?" Peter asked when they were seated behind the honeysuckle vines.

"Visiting," Ken said casually.

"With whom?"

"George took her downtown to one of those morning matinees. *Snow White*, I think."

"Good." Peter relaxed and loosened his tie. "Ken," he said slowly, "I have the picture now. It's one of two people, and I think I can catch us a murderer if I round up the whole crew and accuse Clive Titus."

Ken's feet hit the floor. But hard. "You mean Clive—"

"No. Clive had nothing to do with Jane's murder, but he'll be hard put to it to prove that he didn't. And it will serve to make public property of the Titus-Cready romance. Mark will be put in the position of having to Tell All."

"He'll hate that," Ken observed. "So will Elizabeth."

"I know, but Mark's a big boy now and it's time he acquired a little emotional maturity. It is also high time that Elizabeth started treating him like a man and not like a wayward child."

"What is your reason for accusing Clive?"

"I want," Peter said simply, "to louse up the murderer. All along we have known that it was Jim York—I'm sorry, pal—or someone intent upon making Jim the fall guy. Mara leans to one theory, I lean to the other. If it is Jim," he explained carefully, "Clive will spill his guts. And if it *isn't* Jim, the murderer is going to be afraid we'll condemn the wrong man. The murderer will come to Clive's defense. I hope." He sighed tiredly and shrugged his bearish shoulders. "In any event there is no point in keeping Jane's death a secret any longer. Amos Schroeder has his nose on the scent."

"What?" It came out as a pained yelp.

Peter grinned and nodded. "He's very

generously letting me carry on, but he has put a tail on me and he has checked on the phony story about Del Monte. It seems the last phone call to come through was mine to you, and the last telegram was to the effect that the Tukes girl had a seven-pound, six-ounce boy. Or was it six pounds, seven ounces?"

"Seven pounds, six ounces," Ken answered absently. "At least that's what Peggy Ann told Allie."

"Where is Peggy Ann, by the way?" Peter inquired. "I was to be interviewed again today."

"So was I. She'll be around," Ken promised. "No day complete without Peggy Ann."

"I hope she will," Peter said slowly. "I hope she won't go the way of the Mariner."

Ken's face was white and startled. "What are you talking about?" he demanded harshly. "Why would anyone kill that kid?"

"Peggy Ann, like the Mariner, knows too much," Peter answered. "I only tumbled to it a little while ago," he admitted. "And I'm not clear about it yet. I just know that too many people hear too many things from Peggy Ann. She's been used once and she'll be used again. Peggy Ann," he concluded, "is our original Missing Link."

Allie's voice, sharp and imperative, rang out with the summons for lunch. It further admonished them to come at once unless they wanted everything to be spoiled.

"We'd better go in," Ken said glumly. "Allie's cranky as hell today. When she talks like that she means business."

Over the creamed chicken and peas Peter said, "We're shoving off this afternoon, Alicia."

**R**ELIEF struggled with anxiety on her small face, and anxiety won. "How can you?" she asked. "I mean—nothing has been settled about—about Jane's—disappearance." Words came hard. The words Alicia would let herself say. "If you leave now," she went on, "without—without finding her, Amos will step in."

A look passed between her brother and Peter.

"He's going to step in anyway," Peter said quietly. "He saw right through our

story about Jane being with friends in Del Monte. He knows she's gone." The sight of Alicia's small pinched face struck at his heart. "Don't worry too much about it, Allie," he urged. "It's going to come out all right. I want to follow up a couple of ideas I have and then I'm going to tell all of you what has happened. Maybe you'll help me by getting everyone together here this afternoon."

The jellied salad wavered and plopped on Alicia's plate. "Here?" she asked weakly.

"If you will. About three. I hope I'll have all of the answers by then."

"Of course, if you really think..." Tears long overdue screwed Alicia's face into a monkey grimace. "Peter," she said desperately. "I've done a lot of thinking since yesterday afternoon."

"Yes, Allie?"

"Peter, if any one of us has done—has done some awful thing," she stumbled, "you must tell Amos. I mean, don't let our sentiments stand between you and what you know is right."

"Thank you," Peter said gently. "I won't."

With a little gasp of embarrassment and pain Alicia Grayson fled from the room.

Peter pushed away from the table so abruptly that his chair overturned. "Damn it to hell!" he said harshly, to no one in particular.

"What is it this time?" Mara asked when they were in the car.

"Odds and ends. I'm right at the point where I can almost put my finger on the murderer, but there's something missing."

"What?"

"I don't know. That's what irritates me. It has something to do with the description the Mariner gave, and the anonymous letter, and the phone call to Amos, and the fact that *no* one could know that Jane was meeting Mark on the boat at nine o'clock Friday night."

"I thought," Mara said wearily, "that we had agreed that Clive Titus could know, and the Creadys did for sure, and quite probably Jim York did."

"We can't prove anything," Peter lapsed into a preoccupied silence which lasted until he had parked the car in front of the single movie house. "Wait here," he ordered. "I won't be long."

He found a boy cleaning the lobby with a push broom. "Who is the student who takes tickets at night?" he asked. "A blonde girl, brown eyes, pretty teeth."

The boy looked at him critically, as though he considered Ponsonby much too old for the girl in the cage. "Her name's Esther Hamilton," he said slowly. "Why?"

Peter summoned all of his professorial dignity. "She recovered a wallet that I lost," he improvised. "I wanted to show my appreciation. Can you tell me where she lives?"

"Sure. Three sixteen Hollister." The boy walked to the sidewalk and leaned on his broom. "That's three blocks that way and one more toward the ocean. Esther has all the luck," he grinned.

"Not all of it." Peter pressed a crisp bill into the boy's hand and hurried back to the car.

The house was easy to find: a plain white cottage, sagging beneath the inevitable vines. Esther answered the door.

"Hello," Peter smiled. "I'm sorry to disturb you here at home, but I had a question that couldn't wait until evening. Do you recall my asking you about a show Miss Herrick recommended?"

"Sure. That documentary film we had last week. Will you come in?"

"No, thanks. Was Peggy Ann Larsen with Miss Herrick that evening?"

THE GIRL NODDED. "Yes sir. That is, she came up to the window with her, but she didn't go in. Miss Herrick bought a ticket and then she said good night to Peggy Ann and Peggy Ann went along home. They only live a block behind the movie. My sister Hazel," Esther explained, "goes around with Peg."

"Did you see Miss Herrick after the show?"

"Yes sir. That's when she told me what a fine bill we had on."

"Do you recall what she was wearing?"

Suspicion began to cloud the girl's straight brown gaze. She drew back with a what-business-is-it-of-yours expression and started to close the door. "I don't remember," she said shortly.

Peter slid his foot into the crack and smiled engagingly. "I'm trying to win a wager," he admitted. "It's for ten dollars. If I win I'll split it with you."

The door opened again. "I couldn't take anything," the girl dimpled, "but I'll tell you how she was dressed. She had on a perfectly super blue corduroy suit."

"Skirt or slacks?"

Esther giggled. "Skirt, of course! No one around here wears slacks."

"One more thing: was the suit new?"

"I guess it was," Esther nodded. "I'd never seen it before. When will you know if you win the wager?"

"Just a minute." Peter winked conspiratorially and walked back to the car. "Look chagrined," he muttered to Mara. "You've just lost a ten-dollar bet. Hand it over."

"I'll not only look chagrined; I am." Mara brought a bill from her purse and handed it to Peter reluctantly.

"Here you are!" He waved it gaily to Esther and extracted two fives from his billfold. "We split fifty-fifty."

"Oh, I couldn't!" Esther blushed becomingly and tried to close the door.

Peter was jocose. "Of course you can," he insisted. "Buy books with it."

"Well, maybe *textbooks*. Thanks a million."

"Thank you. By the way, what is Peggy Ann's address?"

"Four twenty-three Maple."

"Thanks again." Peter strode to the car before Esther could wonder at this latest development.

"Here you are." He threw the ten into Mara's lap and began to whistle softly. After a while he said, "Helen has a blue suit. Blue corduroy."

"Slack suit?"

"Un-uhn, Blue would look white at night."

"But a skirt wouldn't look like slacks. Do you *really* think Helen might have killed Jane?" Mara asked, as though the idea shocked her.

"Why not? Jim or Helen: I keep coming back to that old college romance and the death of Blanche York and her strange will. Except that I can't prove anything," he said wryly. "Otherwise it's a lovely theory."

"How did Helen know about the date on the boat?" Mara asked.

"From Peggy Ann, obviously." He braked the car at the curb.

"Whose house is this?"

"Peggy Ann's," he grinned. Peter turned

off the ignition and pushed his hat to the back of his head. "I'm scared, he admitted. "Remember the last time? I get just so close to a murderer and I lose my nerve."

Mara squeezed his hand affectionately. "You aren't afraid of the murderer, darling; you're afraid of the responsibility. Now scram."

"If I don't come back," Peter downed, "drive carefully going home. It's been nice knowing you."

Walking jauntily, he went up the overgrown walk and rang the bell. Nothing happened. He rang again and the bell fell off in his hand. Carefully he laid it on the window sill and knocked.

Mara came running up the path and slipped her hand through his arm. "Darling," she whispered, "I just got it. The surveys, I mean. I thought I better come too, because I know—"

She broke off as the door opened to reveal a thin, frightened-looking woman in a soiled print dress.

"Good afternoon," Peter said briskly. "I want to speak to Mrs. Peggy Ann Larsen."

"She isn't here." The woman's voice was wary and sullen.

"When do you expect her?"

"I couldn't say. Who wants to know?"

PETER permitted himself a small and superior smile. "I'm Mr. Kerlumph," he mumbled, "of the Acme Consumer Study Company. This is my secretary. Mrs. Larsen was recommended to us by one of the national polls as a person qualified to conduct an extensive survey in this county."

The woman thawed visibly. "Come in, if you like." She swung the door open on a small hot sitting room and walked across to turn off the radio. A boy with empty eyes sat in a wheel chair by the window.

"That's her husband." The woman jerked her head toward the soldier. "I'm her aunt, and I take care of him when she's away. What'd you say your name was?"

"Mr. Kerflutz. When do you expect Mrs. Larsen?"

"She's out of town," the aunt apologized. "Would this survey pay good?"

"My secretary handles such matters," Peter said grandly.

"It pays very well." Mara's smile was reassuring. "We need about five hundred ballots filled out, and the supervisor gets fifty cents for every acceptable interview."

"Two hundred and fifty dollars!" the aunt said slowly.

"We could also pay her for the tabulation," Mara added, "if she has time to do it. That is twelve cents an interview, you see."

"Another sixty dollars," Peter translated.

"She'd sure like to make that kind of money," the aunt said wistfully. "Could you wait a few days till she comes back?"

Peter weighed the question and scoffed skeptically. "I doubt it," he said finally. "Has she gone far?"

"N-no, I don't think so. A friend gave her the chance to have a vacation for a few days. Expenses paid," she added quickly. "She'll be back soon."

"When did she leave?" Peter asked. "Have you heard from her?"

"She went off yesterday after lunch," the aunt offered. "And she called last night to see how *he* was. She's to phone again this evening. Maybe," she suggested, "if I told her about this job she could come right home. Would that be soon enough?"

Peter teetered from heel to toe and considered the floor in what he fondly hoped was a businesslike manner. "We wanted to talk with her," he said, "and—if she is satisfactory—get started at once. We are handicapped by having no actual knowledge of Mrs. Larsen's work, you see. Have you some of her recent surveys which we could study?"

The woman gave a disdainful shrug. "That's all we have got," she said. "I'll get some of them."

She came back from what must have been a bedroom carrying the familiar brief case. Peter's breath went out in a long sigh of relief.

"You can look through these," the aunt said indifferently. "Her work's good, I guess."

Peter sat on the sagging sofa and unzipped the portfolio. The last survey had been made on Sunday. The top interview was with Jim York. The time said eleven-thirty. York, Peter noticed had purchased six shirts in June; they were handmade; they cost seven and a half dollars a piece. Fourth from the top was his own modest

purchase of three Arrow shirts. Beneath that were three others—names he did not recognize—and then the retest on the toothpaste began. Peter bundled shirt questionnaires together and handed them to Mara.

Friday. The last call of the day, as Peter already knew, was made on Helen Herrick. The time was six-fifteen. The call before that had been made on Jane Titus. The time was five-fifty. The call before that... Peter sat back and stared at the ceiling, his eyes narrowed in concentration. After a minute he sighed, returned everything to the brief case, and rose.

"Your niece's work seems to be satisfactory," he said grudgingly. "I would be willing to hold the job open for a few days, *provided*"—he stared sternly at the frightened woman—"provided," he repeated, "that I may have these to check over."

"I'm sure I couldn't let you walk off with Peggy Ann's papers," the aunt said tartly. "She thinks more of those than she does of her right eye. I don't know *what* she'd say if I let anyone tamper with them."

"The papers will be returned," Peter answered stiffly, "when Mrs. Larsen returns home. In the meantime," he said generously, "I would be willing to advance something as evidence of our good faith."

Peter pulled his billfold from his pocket and extracted two fifty-dollar bills. "I must ask for a receipt," he said fussily. "For my records."

The woman's pale eyes were glued to the money. "You make it out," she agreed quickly. "I'll sign it."

"Paid in advance for services," Peter scribbled, and added an undecipherable name. "'One hundred dollars.'"

The woman wrote something that looked like Bella Donna Roberts, and probably was.

"Thank you," Mara said sweetly. "We'll see that Mrs. Larsen's papers are returned."

"Where's she to get in touch with you?" Mrs. Roberts asked cautiously.

"We're staying with Dr. Grayson," Peter explained. "Have her call us there when she returns."

They went out.

MARA held the precious brief case and looked at Peter with eyes that were wide and worried. "Is the proof here?" she asked.

"I don't know. Maybe. Maybe not. A couple of missing links are there, anyway. Do you feel like a brisk walk?" Peter grinned.

"No. And why did you give that hag a hundred dollars when ten would have turned the trick?"

"It was that kid sitting there," Peter answered. "And the courage of girls like Peggy Ann who have to coax them back to health. That money may buy them a little forgetfulness."

"You're very sweet. What's this about a walk?"

"Let's see if Peggy Ann carried the good word of Jane's date to Helen Herrick. Look up the interview with Jane Titus."

While Peter drove, Mara riffled through the pages. "Here it is," she reported. "Class A. Thirty sixteen Cyprus. Time, five-fifty." She looked up to observe, "That's too early. Mark hadn't called Jane yet."

"Peggy Ann records the time when she starts," Peter reminded her, and drove past the Graysons' house toward the Country Club. "Peggy Ann—in spite of anything she may say to the contrary—likes to gossip, and she spends about twenty minutes on each interview. Let's have the rest of it."

"Jane used Pepsodent toothpaste and she bought it at the Owl. She used Pepsodent the time before and planned to buy it the next time. Poor Jane! She liked the way it fizzed and she couldn't remember having seen any toothpaste ads. That's all."

"Read the interview with Helen Herrick."

"Class C. Eleven oh one Cyprus. Time, six-fifteen. Helen uses Colgate's, has always used Colgate's, plans to go on using Colgate's. She considers it pure. She remembered the Ipana ad and saw it in the *Post*. So what?"

"So it adds up. No pun intended. Read Jim York's interview on Sunday morning."

"Men's shirts. Class A. Thirty one hundred Cyprus. Time, eleven-thirty. He bought six shirts in June. They were hand-made. They cost seven and a half each."



Mara stopped and looked at Peter. "That's all," she said softly. "Peggy Ann never finished the interview."

"No," Peter sighed. "She never finished it. I wonder why?"

"Because at that point Jim York got the idea of sending her out of town!" Mara cried excitedly. "Don't you see, darling! Jim's the murderer, and *something* that Peggy Ann said gave him the impression that she knew too much. Perhaps she had interviewed the Mariner, or something."

"Why should she interview him?" Peter snapped. "He didn't have any teeth to brush and he never wore a shirt."

"Or maybe York was at Jane's when Peggy Ann went there on Friday. Don't you *see*?"

"It's a possibility," Peter admitted. "But if the murderer gave Peggy Ann her trip, expenses paid, why didn't he—or she—glom onto this portfolio?"

Mara sounded crestfallen. "I don't know."

"I'm inclined to think someone sent Peggy Ann away, expenses paid, to protect her from the murderer."

"Which means," Mara said slowly, "that at least one person here *knows* who killed Jane."

"Right." Peter made a U turn at the at the corner and drove back to the Titus' house. "This is it, babe. Start walking."

"Where?"

"To Helen Herrick's. And, Mara, walk like a *young* person, will you? Put some bounce and zip into it."

"Cad."

"And shorten your stride. After all, Peggy Ann is at least six inches shorter than you."

"All right, all right," Mara said irritably. "Ride along and grow potty while I wear myself to the bone." She started off at a brisk clip, punctuating her progress with an occasional skip and a jump, after the fashion of Peggy Ann.

Peter tipped his hat politely as he passed her.

IT WAS a hot day for walking. Peter drove down the hill and parked at the turn of the street. Lighting a cigarette, he lay back comfortably on the seat and stared at Helen Herrick's neat gray cottage and the two nice old houses across

from hers. It was almost over. In a few hours he and Mara and Candy Too would be rolling back toward Los Angeles and the blessed dullness of their own campus. The ill-starred week end would lie behind them like a bad dream. He thought of Alicia Grayson and a cold hand squeezed his heart. Allie would be harder hit than anyone. Allie wouldn't be able to ride away from Jane's death. If Peter was right.

He looked at his watch and craned to peer up the hill. No sign of Mara.

Hidden behind the pepper trees in the parking, he observed Ken Grayson come out and look up and down the street. Alicia appeared at his elbow, and they looked like nothing in the world so much as a pair of anxious marmosets. Peter grinned affectionately.

George Fawcett came down from her porch and leaned over the fence to talk to them. After a minute she crossed to Helen's house and went in.

Mara had said that at least one person knew the identity of the murderer. Peter felt sure that he knew, and that Amos Schroeder knew—and had known—for a long time, and that Allie had arrived at it by some curious deductive process of her own. Whether or not they all suspected the same person he could not tell, nor which one of them—if any—was correct. They all had their convictions, without proof.

He listened to his watch, frowned, wound it tighter, and gazed up the hill. Mara was still several blocks away. As she approached the next corner she was blotted from view by a big black sedan which swerved to a stop in front of her. Brakes squealed and a door opened.

With something comparable to the speed of light Peter's coupe roared to life and raced up the hill. As he neared the sedan it pulled away and went toward the college.

Mara was standing on the curb, looking hot and tired.

"Sir Galahad!" she said bitterly as she climbed in and kicked off her high-heeled shoes. "How long did it take me?"

"Eighteen minutes. It would have been twenty by the time you reached Helen's."

"If Peggy Ann was there at six-fifteen, she left Jane's at five minutes of six,"



Mara said thoughtfully. "She couldn't have known about Jane's date, Peter."

"Apparently not. What did York want?"

"To give me a lift. I told him I was just out for the air, and so on and so on. Why?"

"No reason."

Sweat stood in beads along Peter's lip and his collar hung limply. He reached out and took Mara's hand for the comfort of her nearness.

## XVI

PETER PONSONBY carried the suitcases out and tossed them into the back of the car, closed the rumble seat, and wiped perspiration from his face. So much for that, he thought. If the next hour went well, he could whistle for Amos Schroeder and the little mouse parked across the street and drive away from the horror of the past two days. Physically, at least. Jane's death would be a brown taste in his mouth for a long while to come.

The Creadys came along the sidewalk, nodded silently, and filed into the house, like people arriving at a funeral.

Peter looked at his watch. Just three. With a sigh he went back out onto the porch.

Mark Cready looked pale and nervous, but he also looked older and less like a sulky angel.

Peter went along the quiet hall and upstairs to Mara's room. He tapped gently, because Candy was sleeping off the effects of the morning's matinee. Mara came out and closed the door behind her.

"Are they all here?" she whispered.

"Only the Creadys."

"What if it doesn't work?"

"If it doesn't," Peter answered grimly, "the three of us will shove off and let Amos handle it any way he pleases. Timing the walk from Jane's to Helen's," he sighed, "knocked my theory into a cocked hat."

"You could still be right," Mara said loyally. "We both could. Suppose York was there when Peggy Ann went for the interview with Jane. They could have both overheard the conversation and then left in York's car. If he dropped her at Helen's, then the time plot works out. Later—Sunday morning—Jim realized that Peggy

Ann would have to be kept out of the way temporarily."

"O.K., you can work out lots of things, honey, but we can't prove them." He sighed disconsolately and hunched his big shoulders. "The police can grill the truth out of Peggy Ann and all the others, but we can't. All we have to work with is a little insight and incredible crust."

Mara kissed him affectionately. "Don't worry," she urged. "You've done your best. Let's go down and turn the heat on."

Helen Herrick sat between Jim York and Clive Titus on the living-room sofa. All three nodded solemnly to Ponsonby. The Graysons balanced uncomfortably on the piano bench, their short legs swinging, and George leaned against the long windows, a cigarette between her lips. Mark and Elizabeth sat in the two occasional chairs at either end of the couch.

A grandfather's chair and the matching small chair—both covered with Alicia's beautiful neat needlepoint—had been left vacant. The seating was not ideal, but Peter was reluctant to suggest changes which would look incongruously like a game of musical chairs. He waited until Mara was seated and then leaned on the back of his chair.

One of these people, he thought soberly, is a murderer. One of these killed Blanche York, and Jane York Titus, and the old man known as the Mariner. That person is desperate. He—or she—may be armed. It was not a comforting thought.

The only people in the room whom Ponsonby feared were seated on the couch. Carefully he placed his big bulk between them and Mara and began to talk.

"We wanted all of you together this afternoon," he began quietly, "because we have news of Jane. We know where she is."

"Good!" York boomed.

The statement seemed to leave the others unmoved. Alicia's eyes went to George; Titus raised an inquiring eyebrow. No one spoke.

"Jane is dead."

The silence was unbroken for a dozen heartbeats, and then everyone spoke at once, inconsiderately. Peter was only sure of three things: Elizabeth gasped, Titus looked at York with eyes wide and unhooded, Alicia began to cry. If there were

other reactions to observe, they were over before Peter saw them.

He waited until the room was quiet and then added, "Jane was murdered."

The group was insensitive to further blows. The faces were pale, sober, drained.

PETER lit a cigarette and waved the match out slowly. With infinite caution he expelled the smoke. "She was killed by someone in this room." He let the words fall, clear and distinct, into the waiting stillness.

That tore it. Out of the stunned silence crawled the snake of suspicion. All the eyes were carefully averted except for two people who turned to stare at York.

"Does that—someone—care to explain matters?" Peter asked.

He waited a long time. The old-fashioned clock on the mantel scratched at their nerves.

When Jim York cleared his throat the sound was as startling as the cutting of a screen. "What proof have you of this—this assertion?" he asked hoarsely.

"I have proof," Peter said easily. "Proof which I will turn over to the police unless—someone—wishes to have this matter handled here this afternoon."

After another long pause Clive Titus said, "What proof have you discovered that Jane was—murdered?"

"Certainly. There are eight of you present." Peter waved his hand to include the group. "Three of you approached me separately and asked me to discover Jane's whereabouts. Each of the three told me that Jane's disappearance was serious. Those three were Dr. Fawcett, Dr. Cready, and Mrs. Cready. Three more jumped on the bandwagon after I had begun my investigation, and they, too, thought Jane's disappearance had sinister possibilities. Those three were Ken and Alicia Grayson and Miss Herrick. That leaves two. You, Dr. York, have insisted that Jane went away voluntarily in search of excitement or companionship."

"I believed it," York insisted. "As God is my witness, I thought it was a joke!"

"You, Dr. Titus, have been curiously indifferent to the whole affair."

"Who killed her?" York demanded. "Who killed my daughter? Tell me, and before God, I'll—"

Peter smiled faintly. "No, I'm afraid you wouldn't do a thing about it. You would crawl back into your ivory tower and protest the reality of violence. Does the murderer wish to continue the story of Jane's death?"

There was no answer, so he went on. "I began by trying to understand Jane and this close little clique to which—in a way—she belonged. Six of you are bound together by the guilty knowledge that Blanche York was murdered. Two of you—the Creadys—are held by the need for economic and professional security. For all of you," he said tiredly, "security depends upon presenting a united front to the college and the town."

"Let's consider Mrs. York's death for a minute. As I understand it, she was killed by the substitution of cyanide for her usual vitamins. As the daughter of a scientist, Blanche would be expected to know something about poisons; a good deal, probably. But she was ill and seldom left the house. The Fawcetts and Clive Titus, on the other hand, all have access to cyanide, and it would not be a difficult matter of any of you to obtain it since you are all college people and are in and out of laboratories. The prints on the bottle were Blanche's, Jim's and the maid's. That does not preclude the possibility of still another person having handled the bottle with a pair of gloves or a handkerchief. All of you were friends of hers; the field is wide open."

Having gotten this far without being shot or even challenged, Peter sat down. His knees, he discovered, had grown rubbery with fear.

"We then discovered that Mrs. York had left an unusual will wherein she divided her estate between her husband and daughter and tied each to his respective marital status. Jim could not remarry; Jane could not divorce Clive. The effects of this will were more far-reaching than most of you suspected." Peter nodded gravely. "Jim, for one, would have married Miss Herrick if it had not meant giving up a sizable fortune."

"You have no right to make such an allegation!" York sputtered. "I had no intention of remarrying."

"Didn't you?" Peter inquired. "How about it, Miss Herrick?"

THE large green eyes were reproachful. "You are putting the wrong interpretation on our friendship," she said. "I gave up all thought of marrying anyone many years ago."

"Whether you did or not," Peter said bluntly, "Blanche York's will decided the matter. Clive Titus," he continued, "entertains a deep affection and admiration for George Fawcett." Titus flushed an ugly crimson and his dark eyes snaked from Ponsonby to George and back again. "He hated his wife, and he did not get—as he had expected—any money for his research. He was permitted to live in Jane's house and that was all. To further complicate matters," Peter went on, "Jim York engaged a young and handsome professor with an unhappy predilection for misunderstood wives. Mark had not been here more than a few months when he became entangled with Jane Titus. He visited her at her house when Clive was absent, and he met her on the *Sprite*. He furnished Jane with the romance she missed."

Peter averted his eyes from Elizabeth Cready's stricken face, but not before he had seen her reach out and take Mark's fingers in hers.

"Nonsense!" York snapped. "You're making that out of whole cloth! Speak up, Mark; tell him it isn't true."

Mark raised his beautiful tortured eyes and smiled faintly. "It's true," he said quietly. "Jane and I saw a great deal of each other." He turned his gaze to Titus. "I'm sorry, Clive," he said simply. "Sorry about the deception, I mean."

"Have you anything more to say, Mark?" Peter asked. Mark shook his curly head. "No."

"On Friday," Peter picked up the recital, "Jane was seen by several of you. Apparently she was in good health and good spirits. When Clive came home from the college she asked him to have dinner alone at the club and go on to the Graysons' party. Or so he says."

Clive gave his faint sardonic smile and nodded agreement.

"What time was that, Professor?"

"After six," Titus answered. "Half-past, perhaps."

"All right. At six o'clock Mark went out to a pay phone and called Jane by prearrangement. Is that correct, Mark?"

"At six, yes."

"Mrs. Cready?"

Elizabeth nodded, her plain face mottled with an angry red.

"Jane answered that call and told Mark she would meet him on the boat at nine o'clock." He turned suddenly to Titus. "How many phones have you in your house?" he rapped.

"Two. One in the downstairs hall and an extension upstairs."

"Thank you. At eight-thirty someone called the Creadys' house. Elizabeth answered the phone. The call was for Mark. He says it was Jane, that she sounded agitated, that she just wanted to tell him that she couldn't keep their appointment at nine. Because Mark had already told his wife he had a committee meeting, he left the house shortly before nine and stayed away until eleven."

He let his eyes travel the circle of faces. "Does anyone care to take over?" There was no answer.

Peter sighed and continued. "We know that Jane went to the *Sprite* at nine. The murderer was waiting for her. After Jane had gone down the ladder to the boat the murderer called her back up. He had fashioned the line by which you slide down, Mark, into a noose, and fastened it to the pilings with a staple. When Jane came up the ladder to meet him he slipped the noose over her neck and pushed her off into space. He waited five or ten minutes to make certain she was dead and then cut her down. Another rope was tied into the eye and the murderer went down to the boat. We know how the murderer was dressed: he was seen by the Mariner—a fact which cost the old man his life, by the way. Fortunately for us, we had already talked with him and had been given a description that could fit only one person. Subsequently the murderer took the boat south to the Tor, carried Jane's body ashore, and brought the boat back to the pier. It was a simple and effective plan.

"Of the eight of you, five are in the clear," he said encouragingly. "Alicia and Ken were here with their guests all evening; George was here except for the short while required to go for the ice cream; Helen was at the movies, and Elizabeth has her student helper to vouch for the fact that she didn't leave the house."

HE SAW the relief on the faces of the five he had named; it fought with their old fear as they looked at Jim York.

"Mark Cready, Clive Titus, and Jim York," Peter went on, "are unable to account for their time between nine and eleven. Of those three, only two could have known of Jane's appointment on the *Sprite*, and of those two — Mark and Clive — I know that Mark is innocent."

His eyes slewed to Clive Titus and he waited expectantly.

Clive laughed harshly, scraping the sound along his rusty throat. "Are you accusing me of murdering my wife, Dr. Ponsonby?" he asked.

Peter nodded pleasantly. "I am accusing you of the murder of Blanche York, Jane Titus, and the Mariner."

Titus's face was a purple fury; York looked shocked and disappointed; the Creadys were patently relieved; the Graysons' little monkey faces smoothed out and reflected Jim York's vindication. George Fawcett and Helen Herrick looked puzzled. Peter waited in breathless expectancy.

"I won't be made to shield that sanctimonious, lying charlatan!" Titus exploded. "If Jim could have wiggled out of this like he did out of Blanche's death, I was willing to keep still, but I won't be the fall guy!" He spoke with controlled venom. "I'm going to Amos Schroeder with the whole story of both murders." He rose and straightened his coat determinedly.

"Wait a minute, Clive." George walked out and laid a restraining hand on his arm. "Peter," she said quietly, "Clive didn't do it. Believe me, you've made some ghastly mistake. It couldn't be Clive!"

"Why not?"

"Clive has no motive."

"That's right," Titus rasped. "I told you yesterday that I had nothing to gain and everything to lose if anything happened to Jane."

"I know," Peter sighed. "You went to great pains to impress me with that. Sit down, both of you, and I'll explain how it was done."

The trap wasn't working. Peter rose and paced the small living room, his hands driven into his trouser pockets. "Clive," he explained, "went home at six. Jane was talking to Mark on the upstairs phone; Titus listened in on the downstairs exten-

sion. He took a length of rope and his bathing trunks and drove to the pier. He fashioned the noose and then went to the club for his dinner. From a pay booth in town he phoned Mark's house and at nine he went back to the beach. He killed Jane and disposed of her body in the manner I have already described.

"The motive," Peter said slowly, looking at all the faces, "was the same as in the case of Blanche York. Clive Titus had expected big things—financially—of his marriage, and they didn't materialize. Blanche had showed him one of the numerous wills he made, and in it she left him part of her estate. Clive killed her. I expect that the anonymous phone call to the police was made by Jane, who disliked Clive and who did not believe that her mother would commit suicide. At all events, the call miscarried and Professor York stood the brunt of the investigation. This fitted in perfectly with Titus' long-range plan. If York were convicted for his wife's murder, all of the estate would be in the hands of Titus and Jane. It must have been a rude shock to Dr. Titus to discover that there was a more recent will in which he received nothing."

Peter paused and mopped his face with his handkerchief, aware as he did so of Mara's sympathetic gaze. It was hard enough, he thought bitterly, to reconstruct a crime when you knew what had happened, and practically impossible when you didn't. His attempt to pin the murders on Clive was as full of holes as a sieve. He wondered, irritably, why no one had mentioned that fact, and could only assume that—with one exception—their ignorance was more abysmal than his.

"Jim had already come in for some damaging gossip," Peter forged ahead. "Clive's next-best bet was to kill Jane and make it look as though Jim had done it. Public sentiment was strong, and Clive hoped that disgrace would drive York to suicide even if he weren't convicted. If all else failed, York could meet with an 'accident' in a year or two and the money—all of it—would be Clive's. The Mariner, pretty obviously, was killed because he saw Clive on Friday night. That's all." He waved his hands tiredly and sat down.

From here on in, he thought, it was their baby.

TITUS had recovered some measure of composure: his eyes were lidded again and the sardonic smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. "Are you taking this cock-and-bull story to Amos Schroeder?" he asked.

Peter shrugged. "What is the will of the group?"

"No," York said emphatically. "It doesn't bring Jane back to us, and the scandal would be terrible!"

"No," George said. "It's an untrue, distorted story, based on supposition rather than fact. Clive didn't kill Jane."

Peter looked at George Fawcett admiringly and as quickly veiled the look.

"I'm sure I don't know what is best," Helen said gently. "Of course anyone who has done such a thing should be brought to justice, but still..." Her voice trailed away into the silence of the room. Once again the clock chattered noisily.

"How about it, Ken?" Peter asked.

"I think it should be taken to the police. Don't you, Allie?"

Alicia lowered her eyes and nodded dumbly.

"Mark?" Peter asked. "Elizabeth?"

A look was exchanged, and Mark said, "Whatever you think is best. The police, I suppose."

"Clive?"

"Take this to Schroeder by all means." Titus smiled thinly. "It will give me an opportunity to talk to him officially."

"Dr. York and George say no," Peter mused. "Clive and four others say yes. What was your wish, Miss Herrick?"

She raised troubled green eyes to his. "You should go to the police," she agreed. "I find it hard to believe that Clive—that any of us—should have done this thing, but since it has happened, the police should be notified."

"Thank you." Peter smiled crookedly at George and York. "I'm sorry," he apologized, "but you're outvoted. That concludes the meeting, I believe. Thanks to all of you for coming over."

"O dear!" Alicia moaned when the last of the unwilling guests had departed. "It seems so awful! I can't believe that Clive would kill Jane!"

"He didn't," Peter sighed. "It was a bluff to force out the murderer. It didn't work."

"Then who is it?" she demanded.

"I don't know. I thought I did, but if I had been right," he said thoughtfully, "it would have come out this afternoon." He rubbed his face tiredly. "It all hinges on three things: who knew about the date between Jane and Mark, who knew we were planning to talk to the Mariner, who wore the white trousers."

"There is some very nice timing there," Mara remarked, "if we could just get it." She leaned down and patted Peter's hand consoling. "You did your best, darling. Turn it over to the chief and let's go home."

"Go on, Pete," Ken urged. "You've done everything you can. Let Amos finish up."

Peter looked at Ken's nice young face, topped by the wispy hair; he looked at Mara's anxious eyes and Alicia's troubled smile. He considered the cracked oilcloth table cover and the wide window framing an uninspiring view of George's cedar hedge. A wide window. A wide window open in the early morning.

Ponsonby's bright blue stare narrowed and his mouth set grimly. "I'll be damned if I will!" he said tightly. "I think I've got it!" He jumped to his feet and pulled Mara to hers in one urgent gesture. "We'll be gone for about an hour," he told Ken. "Stay right here and don't tell anyone anything! Come on, babe, this should be good."

**"FOR THE DOZENTH TIME,"** Mara said patiently, "where are we going?"

"Timing," Peter grinned. "Good old timing! The thing that trips up most murderers. Timing and a teensy-weensy error. Where is the first pay phone?"

"The store near the Creadys," Mara guessed. "At least we know there is one there."

"Good." Peter took the corner on two wheels and Mara's prayer. "While I'm in here I want you to go through Peggy Ann's questionnaires for Sunday and make a time plot. Here's a pencil." He braked the car and jumped out, "I may be gone some time; it's long-distance."

The store was the old-fashioned neighborhood variety with a small and unventilated telephone booth beside the refrigerator.

tor. Peter bought a bottle of beer, uncapped it, and wedged his large body into the inadequate space. There was no light. Cursing roundly, he backed out, took the book to a counter, and looked up three numbers. Back in the little torture chamber, he closed the door tightly and dialed the operator.

"Any luck?" Mara asked when he emerged.

Peter nodded. "More than I deserve. Read me Peggy Ann's schedule." He wheeled the car and drove east on Cyprus Avenue.

"Nine o'clock, Mark Cready," Mara reported. "Nine-thirty, Dr. Donaldson; nine fifty-five, Peter Ponsonby; ten o'clock, Dr. K. C. Grayson; ten-thirty, Pete Smith; eleven-five, Parker Hilton; eleven-fifteen, Joe Brooks; eleven-thirty, Dr. York."

"That's enough." Peter smiled happily. "Now read me Saturday's from four o'clock on," he ordered.

"Four-ten, Mrs. Anson Marble; four-thirty, Alice Kennedy; four-forty, Mabel Kennedy; five o'clock, Marshall Kimball; five twenty-five, John Beggs; five forty-five, Dr. K. C. Grayson; five fifty-five, Mara Mallory; six-ten, Miss Alicia—"

"That's enough," Peter said. "Now Friday from four o'clock on."

Mara riffled back through the wrinkled pages. "This is the toothpaste survey again," she reminded him. "Three fifty-five, Anson Hammerstein; four-twenty, Dr. Elmer Johnson; four forty-five, Mrs. Arkush; five-fifteen, Mrs. Glendenning; five-fifty, Jane Titus; and six-fifteen, Helen Herrick."

"Thanks," Peter said absently. "That's all I need to know." He retired into silence which was unbroken until the car stopped in front of the Graysons' house.

"Our hour isn't up," Mara said brightly.

"No, but our search is," Peter answered. "Come on, moppet."

## XVII

### Alicia Came from the House

Alicia and sat down wearily in the swing. "My," she murmured, "this has been an awful week end! I was just telling George that I thought it would be a good idea if we got away for a trip after this. It would sort of clear the atmosphere."

Peter cocked his head and stared at her admiringly. "Stout idea," he agreed. "You'll need to get away for a while."

"You're back sooner than we expected," Ken observed.

"It was easier than I thought," Peter nodded. "I've got my proof. I'm going to talk to Amos Schroeder and then we'll be on our way."

"Which reminds me," Alicia said illogically, "that Candy isn't here. You can't start till she comes home."

"Where is she?" Peter rapped.

"At George's. Candy is a marvelous child," Alicia said sentimentally. "I hope you'll bring her again when there isn't all this confusion. I keep forgetting what delightful company small people are! So fanciful and so imitative."

Peter sighed, impatient for Alicia to finish. He still had to see Amos Schroeder before they could follow the murderer's injunction and Get Out of Town.

"When she awakened from her nap," Alicia went on, unconscious of the strain she was imposing upon the tall professor, "I told her George had been over to get her. Right away she wanted her hair curled and a fresh dress—"

"I'd packed them all," Mara said regretfully.

"I know, so I pressed her a pinafore and—"

"Look," Peter said with labored politeness, "I've just solved a murder. Three of them, in fact. I want to talk to the police. You wait for Candy, Mara, and I'll pick you both up in half or three quarters of an hour."

Alicia's hands went to her face, and her eyes were frightened. "You mean you found *proof*?" she gasped. "I felt so sure you wouldn't!"

"Yes." Peter reached out and took her two hands in his. "You knew all the time, didn't you, Allie? You and Amos Schroeder. You're a marvelous pair."

Alicia's eyes were dry and sad with a grief too deep for tears. "Yes," she nodded. "At least, I suspected, but I kept hoping against hope that—"

"Chin up, honey." Peter went out through the gate for what he hoped was the last time, ducking low beneath the Paul's Scarlet vine.

He parked behind the Civic Building as



Amos had instructed him and went into the cool, quiet office. The steely-eyed police captain sat at his desk, manicuring his nails with his penknife. He looked up and nodded amiably.

"All finished?" he asked hopefully.

"All finished." Peter sat down opposite Schroeder and fanned himself with his hat. He was hot and very tired. "At least, I've carried it as far as I can."

"Jane was murdered by the same person who killed her mother. And the Mariner was killed because he saw that person with Jane on Friday evening. The murderer could have been identified by the Mariner. Well, I know who it was, too." Amos smiled gently. "I received an anonymous phone call about two-thirty this afternoon," he said. "It put the finger on Professor York."

"Two-thirty? Yes," Peter nodded. "That fits. You were watching the phone booth, I hope?"

"We sure were."

"Then that—plus what I have—will give you a nice airtight case."

"That's more than I had the last time," Schroeder gloated. "More than I'd have had this time," he said generously, "if it hadn't been for you. She tripped up somewhere, I suppose?"

"Yes," Peter mused, "she tripped up on her pretty new clothes. Everyone talked so much about that new green dress that it finally became important. Helen Herrick made the mistake of saying that it had been ordered from Roos Brothers. When I finally tumbled to it I started by phoning the San Francisco store and worked south. The dress was bought at Fresno, and also a three-piece corduroy suit—coat, skirt, and slacks.

"She wore the slacks on Friday night so that anyone seeing her would think it was Jim York in white flannels. Later she realized that she had overdone it and the purchase could be checked, so she killed the Mariner before he could describe Jane's companion. She made some other mistakes too. For—"

"Excuse me."

AMOS picked up the shrilling telephone, and even across the desk Peter knew that the thin wail of terror belonged to Mara.

He snatched the phone from Schroeder and shouted, "What is it?"

"Allie says Helen killed Jane!" she screamed.

"I know it," Peter snapped. "So what?" He saw Amos Schroeder disappear into the next office.

"She's gone," Mara answered. "And taken Candy with her!"

Fear closed Peter's throat. When he could speak he said, "I thought Candy was with George."

"She was. But George has thought all the time Jim was the murderer, and when Helen came over and asked to borrow the car to take Candy to the fair, George didn't think anything of it. She told Helen not to be gone long because we were leaving for L.A., and let Candy go. Where's Schroeder?"

Schroeder's voice came in on the extension. "I'm right here. Be out in front of the house and we'll pick you up."

As the police car squealed around the corner the siren rose to a thin scream.

"Where will she take Candy?" Peter asked.

"I can't be sure." Schroeder kept his eyes on the racing pavement. "I'm going to try to outthink her this time, and my guess is that she really will go to the fairgrounds. The child is just a little tyke, isn't she?"

"Three and a half." The image of fat, hot, dirty little Candy was heartbreakingly clear.

"Then Helen will have a job keeping her quiet," Schroeder said sagely. "And she'll be expecting us to go off in the opposite direction. My guess again is that she'll hide out in the fair concessions until the first alarm dies down and then abandon the car for some other means of transportation and head out of town. She needs time to make plans."

"Plans for..." Peter couldn't say it.

Schroeder cast him a quick look of sympathy. "The child will be used as a lever," he said. "I think she is safe enough."

He braked the car, and Mara was in the seat with them before they had come to a stop. Her face was white and her hair disheveled. She was clutching Candy's elephant in her arms, and Peter had never found her so appealing.

"She dropped Pooh Bah," Mara whis-



pered. "Allie and I went to George's for her, and George said Helen had taken her. Allie went all to pieces. She said Helen was the murderer, and I knew she was, so we raced across to Helen's house to see what we could find and there was Pooh Bah on the sidewalk. Hello, Amos."

"Hello, Mara." He reached across Peter and squeezed Mara's arm. "Candy's just being held as a hostage," he said quickly. "She's the price of our silence. We'll let Helen go."

Mara laughed feebly. "Alicia always said this town needed a new police captain," she answered. "Thanks, Amos, but let's hope it won't come to that."

"How did you and Alice figure it was Helen?" Peter cut in.

"Allie arrived at it by some esoteric process of her own," Mara said, "but I *knew* it had to be Helen from something that Allie told me. You remember, Peter, when you left, Allie was just saying how Candy insisted upon having her hair curled before she went to George's. Then Candy wanted to wash her face and clean her nails. And, Peter, when she cleaned her nails she insisted upon using the scissors—like Aunt Helen, she said. Helen hasn't any nail file. She must have broken it digging out the staple. I got to putting pieces together and I knew Helen had to be our murderer. Her mind is *twisted*, Peter. Then I remembered the scarf around Jane's neck. It was exactly the sort of style Helen would have gone for; and all the new clothes—there could have been slacks among them. What's wrong with her?"

"She hates being an old maid."

AMOS swung the car out onto a stretch of country road. The siren whined to a halt. "In a way," he explained, "Jim is to blame, because he kept her dangling all the years Blanche lived. He made Helen feel that she was the only person who understood him and that he had made a mistake in not marrying her. Helen believed him, unfortunately. She believed him so thoroughly that she stole poison from Clive's laboratory and killed Blanche York. She knew about the will, but she never thought it would make any difference to Jim. I was pretty sure of my facts at the time but I couldn't prove anything. I tried to flush her out into the

open by accusing Jim," Schroeder smiled, "but it didn't work."

"I tried the same thing today," Peter nodded. "I put the finger on Clive Titus hoping Helen would come to his defense, but she was too smart. I scared her, though," he added complacently.

"You certainly did," Mara said bitterly. "You scared her right into kidnaping my niece!"

"We're almost there," Amos told them. "Try to give me an outline of this thing, Professor."

"George asked us to find Jane," Peter said. "Then the Creadys came to me—separately—and suggested that I give them a hand in locating Jane. By talking to this one and that one we picked up Jane's trail on Friday afternoon, followed it through a phone conversation with Mark making a tryst for nine o'clock on the boat, through another phone call which Jane was supposed to have made to Mark at eight-thirty canceling the date, to the minute when she hailed the *Mariner* and got onto the *Sprite*. She died immediately after."

"Helen," he continued, "is—as Mara said—*twisted*. Whatever she once felt for Jim, it has curdled. I think she has planned for some time to frame Jim, and the most obvious way of doing it was to kill Jane, because Jim had a motive for that. I think she must have known exactly how she was going to do it when the occasion presented itself. No doubt it furnished her a great deal of innocent merriment to consider her 'perfect crime.' It darned near was, you know."

"On Friday she helped Alicia prepare for a party, and then about six she went home and fixed her supper. Peggy Ann Larsen came dashing in a little later and informed Helen that Jane was meeting Mark on the boat at nine. Peggy Ann," Peter said sorrowfully, "is a damned little busy-body, and she has gladly supplied Helen with gossip in exchange for free meals and other gratuities. Anyway, this was the break Helen had been waiting for. She knew, from Alicia, that Jim was at home for the evening. She also knew—probably from—Jane—that the house-boy was away. Jim would be left without an alibi. Helen fed Peggy Ann and went to the movies. She entered at seven-fifteen

and left by the side door a few minutes later. She walked home, got the slacks that went with her new light corduroy suit, took the rope, and went back to the pier. She fashioned a noose from the line hanging from the davit and tacked it out of the way with a staple."

"She could hammer the staple in with a shoe heel," Mara interrupted, "and fasten the rope to it with string."

"Then all she had to do," Amos guessed, "was to call Mark and keep him away so she could meet Jane at nine o'clock. Right?"

"Yes. Jane went out on the pier, spoke to the Mariner, and descended the ladder. A few minutes later Helen spoke to her from above. What she said," he shrugged, "is anybody's guess, but at all events, Jane went up and Helen came down. Midway she slipped the rope over Jane's head and kicked her into space. We found bruises on her chest. Helen gave her a few minutes to die then cut her down. She tied another rope in the eye, climbed down the ladder, donned the slacks, and rode off. She purposely cut in by the end of the pier to give the Mariner a chance to identify her as Jim York. At the Tor she cut the motor, waded ashore with Jane, and chucked her in the bushes. Mara," he concluded proudly, "fell over her."

"Amos," Mara said unexpectedly, "I think I know where the wet slacks are."

PETER turned to stare admiringly at Mara. In spite of her concern over Candy, her agile brain had not lost its grip on the essential problem. "What do you mean?" he asked.

A dimple winked at him for a moment as Mara smiled. "When we ran over to Helen's house the incinerator was burning. Not burning properly," she explained, "but smudging and sending up yellow smoke. I closed the damper, and after I phoned the police department I told Ken to get everything out of there. I told him to search the trash too, for the rest of the nail file."

Schroeder chuckled appreciatively. "Which of you is the sleuth?" he asked.

The fairgrounds were on their right. Hoardings screamed attractions, and a

calliope bellowed above the raucous cries of barkers.

"This is it," Amos said quietly. "I don't know what we're walking into, folks, but I know I can't go in as a police official. I want to get your niece out, Miss Malory, and I want her to be alive."

Mara nodded and held Pooh Bah tighter. "Thanks, Amos. Just tell us what you want us to do."

"I will. Let's make sure she is here first."

He wheeled slowly along the road. A red Ferris wheel turned, swinging its little basketfuls of people; tinny music competed with the roar of motors; and the air was sticky with the sweetness of popcorn balls and sugar apples.

A toothless imp jumped on the running board and stuck a handful of pennants through the window. "Hi, Amoth!" he lisped. "Buy a pennant. Pleath! They're only ten thents."

"Hi, Eddie." Amos pulled a quarter from his pocket and handed it to the child. "I'll take two. Better grow some teeth before school opens," he teased, "or the big boys will have a lot of fun at your expense."

"They're growing," the boy answered proudly. "Thee?"

"By the way, Miss Herrick come in, or did we miss her?"

"Thee came in about an hour ago," the boy grinned. "Thee had a little girl with her. A girl with hair like hith." He pointed the pennants at Peter.

"Well, thanks a lot," Amos smiled. "We'll go in and surprise her." He leaned over confidentially. "I'm going to park right there," he told Eddie, "and if we miss her and she comes out before we do, I want you to blow my siren. Could you do that?"

Eddie's eyes were saucer-wide. "Gee!" he breathed reverently. "Gee!"

"I'll leave the keys in the ignition," Amos added. "You can get your father to help you. And, Eddie—if you blow, blow like sixty!"

"No one could find us," Amos sighed, "once we go through that turnstile. Keep your ears flapping for the siren. Come on."

"Hold it." Peter jerked his head toward the dirty little sedan sliding into a

space behind the police car. The dusty man slid down behind the wheel and drew his hat over his face. "What was the idea of having me tailed?" Peter asked.

"Tailed?" Schroeder repeated.

"Yehudi over there. The drab little man in the Ford."

Schroeder peered, grinned, and waved. "That's Elmer," he said indulgently. "Elmer doesn't work for us. He writes for the pulps. Come on," he repeated.

Peter took Mara's cold hand in his and helped her through the ankle-deep dust to the entrance gate.

"Hello, Captain!" A weasel-faced man in the ticket window gave the police officer an ingratiating smile. "Anything wrong with our show?"

"No, no," Amos said reassuringly. "I'm just showing my friends the sights."

"That's good. Go right on in."

"Thanks." They walked through.

Mara looked bewilderedly at the milling people. "How can we ever find them?" she asked.

"We'll split up," Schroeder told her. "Professor, you take the left-hand side; Mara, you take the right. I'll try to cover the open spaces, and each time that we come opposite one of the hot-dog stands let's check."

Mara nodded bleakly. "We can try it," she said. "And I hope they're in my territory. If I ever get my hands on Helen Herrick I'll tear every dyed hair from her nasty scheming head."

"Don't be a sucker," Peter snapped. "If you're smart you'll glue a nice smile on that pretty pan of yours and act as though you didn't suspect a thing. Let it look as though we had come to collect Candy so that we could go home." He shook her arm gently. "Come on, play up."

Mara smiled wanly. "All right."

Amos's sharp eyes went from one to the other of them. "Good luck," he said simply.

## XVIII

THE SUN LAY like an oppressive blanket on Peter's shoulders. A barker shouted the questionable attractions of his concession and a fat woman in a sweat-stained dress leered down from a make-shift platform.

"See Suzie do the cancan!" cried the barker. "Can she do the cancan! Can a duck swim? Step right up! Ten cents to see Suzie do the cancan!"

No one was interested in seeing Suzie do the cancan.

Peter asked, "Have you seen anything of a tall blonde woman and a fat little girl with red curls?"

"We ain't seen nobody," Suzie growled. "Not one damned customer all afternoon."

"I'm sorry," Peter smiled. "I'll come again when I have more time." He tipped his hat and hurried on.

"See Lulu," the next man urged. "No arms, no legs. *Yet!*"—he paused dramatically—"Lulu can type, knit, and dress herself! See this amazing feat! Ten cents! The tenth part of a dollar! An amazing feat of dexterity! Thank you!" He handed tickets to a farmer and his two sons.

"What to see Lulu, bud?"

"No, thanks. Have you seen a tall blonde woman and a fat little girl with red curls?"

"A tall blonde? How old?"

"Old enough to be your mother. It's the child I'm trying to find. She's three and a half, dressed in a pink pinafore, probably crying."

"Haven't seen her 'bud. Sorry. See Lulu!" he bellowed. "No arms, no—"

Peter hurried on to the next booth.

It was a squat dark woman with a mole on her chin who furnished the first clue. "Red curls?" she smiled. "Sure, I see her. Maybe half an hour ago. Very tired, poor baby."

"Where did they go?"

"That way. The lady bought the baby a hot dog."

"Did you see a tall woman and a fat little girl with red curls?" he asked the woman behind the hot-dog counter.

She turned to a pretty blonde at the other end. "Guy asking about that cute little red-haired kid," she said languidly. "Whatcha wanta know?"

The two of them leaned over the counter and chewed their gum in Peter's face.

"Do you know where they went from here?" Peter asked.

The girls exchanged glances and giggled. "Over there," the blonde pointed.

*Women*, the sign read.

Mara and Amos came up then, and Peter repeated what he had learned.

"I'll be right back." Mara hurried off and reappeared a few minutes later. "No one there now," she reported. "You should make them do something about that place, Amos. It's a disgrace!"

"I will. All right, let's meet at the next hot-dog stand."

When they reconvened Mara's eyes were bright with excitement. "I've found them!" she whispered. "A friend of Tony's saw them go into the auto races about ten minutes ago!"

"Who is Tony?" Peter asked suspiciously, knowing Mara.

"Oh, a friend. A Portuguese. I picked him up back there." She waved her hand vaguely toward the entrance. "Let's go in and get Candy."

Amos caught her wrist. "Listen," he urged. "Do as Peter says: act pleasant. I'll try to stay out of sight so as not to scare her into—making any sudden move. Take it easy. We're here to get your niece, not Miss Herrick."

The ticket taker passed them in on the strength of Schroeder's uniform, and they stepped into a tent that was hot and gaseous in spite of its great size. *Watch Your Step!* a large sign warned. Peter took Mara's elbow and helped her down the short flight of rickety steps to a place beside the track. Amos lagged behind, hat in hand, looking as unofficial as it was possible for him to look.

OVER a public-address system an announcer was bawling statistics. Beneath him on the track six jalopies, manned by six maniacal teen-agers, rattled impatiently. At a signal they shot away. Minus fenders, bumpers, and all other protection, they jockeyed for position. It was a gruesome sight. The cars completed the first lap and dust settled grittily on the customers. A black-and-red number with *Betty* painted on the back was in the lead.

"Why do you permit this?" Mara screamed over the rattle and clatter.

Schroeder shrugged good-naturedly. "Rather they raced here than through town," he shouted back.

"Little fiends!" Smiling vacuously, Mara turned her attention to the people sitting on the plank seats. There were five rows, all filled with college students, children, and farmers. They shouted, stamped, and

rose in unison to follow the progress of the cars. For some inexplicable reason, they seemed to be enjoying themselves. Peter looked at them with open curiosity he would have shown for Marsmen.

There was no sign of Helen Herrick. Slowly Peter and Mara moved around the railing, Amos trailing at a discreet distance. When they had covered a quarter of the distance around the tent Mara stopped and laid her hand on Peter's arm. He knew by the tightness of her smile she had seen Helen Herrick.

There she was, directly opposite them, smiling and bowing. She wore the new green dress, and even at a distance her eyes were like large moist grapes, bright and eager. She was standing by the track, leaning against the wobbly fence, and a white-faced Candy Too was balanced precariously on the top bar.

In spite of the intense heat Peter felt cold shivers coursing along his spine. Carefully, as though Helen had held a loaded gun—more carefully—he waved his hand and smiled. Candy's pudgy legs jerked as she strove to balance on the narrow board.

"Can you see her?" he mouthed over his shoulder.

Amos' answer came from behind him. "Yes. She's waiting for us to make a sign."

"It better be the right one," Peter lippled, "or she'll pitch Candy into the ring."

"Another accident."

The cars careened around again and Candy swayed perilously. Suddenly she began to cry—wearily, inexhaustibly—and to scrub her eyes with dirty knuckles. Peter cast a glance at Mara, and knew how Hate looked.

"Helen wants something," she observed, still smiling. "She's pointing."

"It's Amos," Peter interpreted. "Come out of hiding, Amos. She's seen you."

The last words were lost in the roar of the cars, but Amos oozed gently from behind Ponsonby and discovered Helen with a gay salute.

Helen stared hard to the three of them and shook her head slowly from side to side.

"It isn't good enough," Peter said. "She wants a signal. For God's sake, Amos, let her know she's safe!"

"Not yet!" Mara ordered. "I'll tell you when." She cocked her head at Helen

Herrick and turned her hands out in a what-do-you-want expression.

Helen waved her handkerchief and then let Candy slide forward in a gesture of unmistakable significance.

"I'm to wave my handkerchief," Amos said. "If I don't—"

"Not yet!" Mara said again. For half a dozen heartbeats she stood still, holding Helen's eyes with hers. "*Now!*" she cried. "*Now, Amos!*"

Amos whipped the large white square from his pocket and fanned it up and down: a white flag of surrender. On the far side of the track Helen nodded agreement and lifted Candy to the ground.

AND THEN it happened. As if on signal, a fat woman with gold earrings rushed forward and dashed away with the screaming child as half a dozen huge Portuguese showmen closed in on Helen Herrick. Peter had time to see only the flash of her terrified eyes before she was blotted from view.

"The Portuguese," Mara said conversationally, "are such nice *family* men."

"Where the devil did they come from?" Amos asked as they fought their way around the railing.

"I told Tony that Helen had kidnapped our baby," Mara explained. "I pointed Peter out to him. I said we'd give them a signal. I said the police would show their appreciation. I—Peter, I—" Mara's beautiful gray eyes closed, and Peter caught her as she fell.

"Go on," he told Amos. "It's your affair now. I have to get Mara out of here."

At the doorway the greasy woman with the gold earrings gave him Candy Too. "She is all right," she smiled. "To many hot dogs is all. Good-by, little one."

"Carry me, Uncle Peter," Candy begged. "I ache."

Peter looked from Mara to Candy and back to Mara. Abruptly he stood her on her feet and shook her roughly. "Come on!" he ordered. "Get going under your own steam."

Mara slanted her eyes at him obliquely. "Brute. Oh Candy darling!" She picked Candy up and kissed her fervently. "You smell of garlic. You carry her, Peter, and I'll drive."

DID Amos arrest Helen?" Alicia asked. "I guess so. We left before he got into action," Peter answered.

"Amos will know how to handle everything," Allie nodded. "Amos is smart."

Alicia had changed in some indefinable way, Peter realized. Her small face looked younger and happier than it had before.

"Oh, Allie," Mara breathed, "you're marvelous! And we adore Amos. Please give him some encouragement."

"Come on," Peter ordered. "We're just one leap ahead of the law, as usual. We've told Amos almost everything: the three of you can fill in the blanks. Amos has Jane's body already. Tell him how that scarf was knotted around Jane's neck when we found her. And give him these, Ken." He handed over Jane's jewelry and the tip of the nail file. "Did the incinerator yield anything?"

"The zipper from the slacks," George said eagerly, "and enough cloth for identification. The rope was in there too."

"Good. Tell him Helen found out about the Mariner by listening outside the kitchen window Saturday night, Ken. It gave her all of our findings to date, and scared the hell out of her. Amos will want these too." He added the anonymous letter and Peggy Ann's surveys. "See that these get back to Peggy Ann," he cautioned, "and remind me to give you her brief case; it's in our car. Peg was at Jane's when Mark called and she told Helen about the date. That was my big mistake," he grinned. "Peggy Ann's watch was twenty minutes slow."

"I'll drive you to the police station," Ken volunteered, "and take Amos' car back to him."

George Fawcett walked to the car with Peter. Her lovely face was serene again. "Thank you," she said simply. "You were wonderful." She gave him her firm, short-fingered handclasp.

The shining police car slid along Cyprus. Peter turned around with a sigh and took Mara's hand in his.

"I wonder," he said wistfully, "if Amos will call us back to testify?"

"If he does, we won't come," Mara said firmly. "After all, Peter, the last thing in the world we want is to be mixed up in a murder."

# *The* **WITCHES' POOL**



*By*  
**SUSAN WELLS**



# THE WITCHES' POOL

By SUSAN WELLS

I REMEMBER THE WIND. When the bus reached the Coast Highway junction there was the same steady gale blowing from the sea. It had been blowing like that four years ago when I went away. Now people began to grab at their hats and shut the windows. A large sign had fallen down from somewhere and lay sprawled in the middle of the road. It said: NO VACANCY.

"That just about sums it up," said the driver, making the wide turn. "No vacancies from here to San Diego!"

The woman who sat beside me on the front seat was broad in the beam and dressed in brown. She had a thin, high-bridged nose and she looked like a nice brown hen.

"Does he mean to say," she said, "that I can't get hotel accommodations at Newport Beach tonight?"

For a moment there was silence in the bus as if everyone had died. "Sister," said the driver, "are you kidding? People out here is moving into empty piano crates." In the rear view mirror he winked at me.

The woman was inspecting me. "You are going to Newport, too, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I came to look up somebody," she said. "I had no idea it would be like this. Crowded! I used to work for some people here. I'm a nurse. It was quiet and respectable then—only the best families!"

She looked moodily out of the window. It had taken this much to arouse my interest, for I had been thinking of Tony. But now I followed through. I could picture her getting off the bus at Newport with her durable, well-travelled suitcase, looking for a family that may have moved away—and the afternoon shadows lengthening, and no place to stay.

"But what will you do?" I asked.

"Don't worry about me! I'll find something. What about you?" She looked at me narrowly with those unpleasant eyes.

"Well," I said, "a sort of miracle hap-

pened to me. I found a place! The saleswoman who sold me this suit had a sister, a Mrs. Bessie Blew, with a room to rent in Newport!"

"And you got it."

"Yes, I rushed to the phone, quick like a mouse, and called her up. It's all settled. It was as simple as that!" I snapped my fingers to show how simple it had been.

"Of course, it is only a room," I said, "But that is something."

"Yes, it's something," she said.

I CLOSED my eyes. It was certainly something! Tony was coming home. He had been away four years—and where had he been? In the Infantry! Tony who loved the sea so much!

In the eyes of the mind I could see him standing on the deck of the *Paquita*, his blond hair blowing, the collar of his parka turned up, the far horizon dipping and heaving behind him. That was how I thought of my husband, Tony. The *Paquita* had been our yawl; an eighty-foot job, all speed and grace. We never had had a housing problem, for we lived aboard her.

Then, in '41 we sold her. That was before the war.

I remember standing with Tony upon the palisade at Corona del Mar, watching her cruise out of Newport Harbor along the breakwater, a stranger at her helm.

Eric Conway and David Vinson, the new owners, were taking her on a sort of shakedown cruise, before setting off for Bermuda. With them was the lovely girl (Mary Ellen was her name) who was to be Conway's bride.

I remember shading my eyes with my hand, to hide my tears from Tony.

"He's all right," Tony said. "This Conway—whoever he is—he handles her well. She's in good care!" Then he said, "Some-day we'll buy her back from him, beautiful, and then we'll go to Bermuda!"

I opened my eyes. The bus was snaking along wide stretches of beach and open



sea. The wind was whipping every wave as white as salt, and white gulls were screeching and wheeling overhead.

Along the highway there were white stucco motels with red tile roofs, boat-building establishments, live bait stands, garages, and wayside cafes.

I knew it all so well. My heart pounded. I was watching for the little incline in the road, and the familiar turn where one caught the first glimpse of the Newport yacht harbor—Balboa and Lido, and the long wide channel bordered with rows of swaying masts.

Then as the bus swept by I had a glimpse of the thing for which my heart longed. Tied up to the old wharf—near and unmistakable—I saw the *Paquita*!

The next instant a turn in the road blotted out the harbor and the boats.

THE San Diego bus stopped a half-hour at a seafood cafe in Newport. While some of the passengers crowded about the lunch counter gulping coffee and sandwiches, others crossed the highway to stand along the embankment looking at the view.

From that point, however, the view of the *Paquita* was obstructed by rooftops. I stood for a moment upon the sidewalk, undecided, with the wind whipping my hair about my forehead. There was only one taxicab at the curb. I could take it and go at once to the sheltering portals of Mrs. Bessie Blew's house, or I could walk along the embankment for a block or so and try to get another look at the *Paquita*.

The glimpse from the bus window had been so brief. I wondered whether I had been mistaken.

"Perhaps it was wishful thinking," I told myself, and turning at that moment I saw the brown hen and her luggage disappearing into the only cab.

"That settles it," I said aloud, and picking up my bag I began walking along the embankment, leaning into the wind.

I walked as far as I could, but at the end of the curbing the view was still partly obstructed.

When I came back the bus was still there. Travel-worn passengers were filing slowly out of the cafe, clutching their coats about their chins and making remarks about sunny California. The driver leaned against

the back of the bus, leeward of the wind, and picked his teeth thoughtfully. As I approached he straightened up.

"What just happened to you, Gorgeous," he said, "shouldn't happen to do a dog!"

I raised my eyebrows inquiringly.

"It's none of my business," he said, "so I couldn't do nothing—but that dame—the one beside you—she got herself a room."

"Yes?"

He sighed and threw the toothpick away. "I heard her tell the cab driver."

I put down my suitcase and we stood staring at each other. Then I moistened my lips with my tongue.

"Mrs. Bessie Blew?" I whispered softly.

"Right!"

The wind whipped my coat about me. I stood there shivering.

"Whatcha going to do?" he asked.

"When that cab gets back," I said bitterly, "I'm going up there, and I'm going to get my room!"

He shook his head.

"It won't do you no good, Gorgeous. When she pays her rent and gets her receipt you can't kick her out. Nobody can kick her out. She knows it!"

"I suppose you're right," I said. "But I'll tell you one thing: confidentially—I could kill her!"

The wind died down at sunset. Along Newport Harbor little stabs of light began to show upon the water. Until it was almost dark I lingered upon the headland, huddled in my coat—viewing the *Paquita* from different angles. There was a new moon behind her, low in the West. And there she was—tall against the evening sky. Nothing in the world looked more beautiful.

During the afternoon I had made futile attempts to find a place to stay, and I had checked my suitcase at the highway cafe. I had looked up old friends and found them gone. I had walked down to see my old crony, Pop Seely, who kept a bait shack at the harbor's edge—and found that even he was gone for the day, and the shack closed up tight.

Now I walked along the wood plank-ing, all the way to the end of the boardwalk, breathing deeply of the familiar harbor smells, and listening with a loving ear to the splash of water against each little boat along the quay.

Suddenly I felt lonely, absolutely alone. And it had to be at this particular moment that I saw the shoe.

It was a woman's shoe—a brand new calfskin pump—and it was wedged between two boards at the edge of the pier. I stood staring at it. From the way it was caught in the crack between the boards it looked as if the owner had lost her balance and toppled forward into the sea below.

I walked reluctantly, I remember, to the edge and looked down into the darkening water. There were dim aisles of mossy pilings exposed to the rising tide.

Then I cried out.

Wedged in a crossbeam below the surface of the water I saw the thing. Even in the twilight I could see that it was the body of a woman floating face downward.

## II

LONG BEFORE THE BODY was recovered I edged my way out of the crowd of morbidly curious that stood about in the darkness. The police launch came and went, bringing a diver from Wilmington on its return trip.

"There's a woman down there," people kept explaining to each other.

"Poor thing! She caught her foot and fell!"

"Isn't it awful!"

The diver who recovered the body failed to recover any clue to the woman's identity. She lay upon a marble slab in the Newport morgue all that night and for another day. When she was identified at last it was by me—but that was later.

Walking back along the boardwalk I felt sick and wobbly. I was not frightened—there was at that time no apparent reason for being frightened, but I was deeply depressed. My footsteps were the only sound. I went back the way I had come, and stood for a long while looking at the *Paquita*. She was dark and deserted.

"Down in the cabin," I thought to myself, "there is a comfortable bunk which was mine. Nobody is using it. There's a good mattress, and warm bedding smelling divinely of salt and sea air. I would harm nothing—Nobody would ever know—"

I shivered a little, and thrusting my hands deep into the pockets of my coat, walked to the end of the slip and stood

for a moment looking up into the rigging.

The coast was absolutely clear.

Grasping the deck rail I swung myself aboard and stood for a moment fumbling in my handbag for a cigarette, and fighting a losing battle with my conscience. Actually, I was tired to the point of exhaustion. For a moment longer I hesitated. It was the matches that won the argument. I had cigarettes, but I had no matches. Down in the galley there would be the tin match box—

The cabin portholes were curtained, and the hatch was locked.

But I knew about that lock. There was something that could be done to it with a hairpin and a nailfile, and it would open with a faint protesting sound.

I took one last look at the cold night sky, and then opening my handbag again, extracted a hairpin and nailfile and fell to work.

Down in the cabin it was as dark as the inside of a pocket. I had no fear of the dark, and there was no strangeness. It was like coming home. I groped my way into the galley and could smell the kerosene stove and the faint aroma of coffee that always hung about the place. Above the stove there would be the supply cupboard with the tin box that held matches.

Nothing had changed. The box was there.

By the flaring light of a match I saw now that the cupboard was empty except for a few cannisters. It satisfied me that the *Paquita* was not in use. But as the match burned down I saw something that caused me to strike another one, and then another.

"How strange!" I said aloud to myself in the darkness.

There was a bullet hole in the back wall of the cabinet. I closed the cabinet door and struck another match. But there was no hole in the door. A shot had evidently been fired at some time into the cabinet while the door was open.

I went on forward through the dining salon and into the stateroom on port side that had been Tony's and mine, and hung up my new suit in the empty closet where we used to stow our stuff. In the adjoining bath I bathed my face in the thin trickle of cold water that came from the almost empty tank.

Then without more ado I climbed into the bunk that was mine and slept, as sleep only the just, the dead, or the completely exhausted.

That was at about nine o'clock. At fifteen minutes after ten I awoke sitting bolt upright.

Someone was coming down the companionway. With a flashlight.

I sat rigidly still and watched through the half-open door of the stateroom as the moving light approached from the companionway. Presently a girl materialized behind it. I am sure I do not know just what I expected, but with great relief I recognized her as the lovely girl who had been engaged to Eric Conway four years ago.

She came into the dining salon and lit the Coleman lamp above the table. Then she moved again into my line of vision and sitting down before the folding desk against the partition, began to rummage through the pigeon-holes in an unaccustomed way, searching for a piece of paper and then a pen.

The light from the Coleman lamp shone upon her head, and I could see how really beautiful she was—her skin flawless and sun tanned under the glaring light, and her hair as dark and smooth as walnut. She must have been a year or two younger than I—about twenty or twenty-three.

I heard the scratch of the pen clearly in the little cabin. I wondered that she did not hear the pounding of my heart.

Now she rummaged again among the pigeon-holes and found an envelope; and I wondered about her unfamiliarity with the desk. She seemed to be a stranger here—almost an intruder like myself.

She did not loosen her coat, but sat bent above her writing deeply absorbed. When she had finished she addressed the envelope, and sealed it.

Then suddenly there were footsteps on the deck above, and the heavy tread of a man coming down the companionway. I saw her wild look of alarm. She thrust the note into the desk and, closing it stood to face him as he came into the salon.

He was a small, wiry man of about sixty with sharp cheekbones and grey hair. The light that had enhanced her beauty fell starkly across his tense face and flashed upon his pincenez glasses.

"Mary Ellen!" he cried in an exasperated voice, "where the devil have you been, and what are you doing here?"

She clasped her hands behind her back and lifted her face to look at him, the gesture oddly naive, like a naughty little girl caught in the act of stealing apples.

"You shouldn't be so concerned about me, really, you know!" she said.

He ran his narrow hand through his thin hair. "David said you went out at four," he said. "He said you had a phone call from someone. Who was it?"

She lit a cigarette for herself, and inhaled deeply. Then she sat down on the settee and stretched her long, lovely legs.

"Yes, Allen," she said, "I had a telephone call. It wasn't intended for me. You'll never guess—it was Eva—Eva Singleton!"

"Oh!" he said.

"You remember Eva, don't you, darling? She was the maid—"

"Of course, I remember." His voice had changed abruptly, and she turned now and looked at him as though startled by the change in his voice.

"What did she want?" he asked softly.

"She wanted to see Eric."

There was a pause.

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her the truth. I said I hadn't seen or heard of him in four years."

There was another little silence, while neither looked at the other. She continued to smoke her cigarette and contemplate the toes of her black sandals.

"So then she said she would like to see me," said Mary Ellen softly. "She said she would meet me in the bar of the Burley Bell at five-thirty."

"What an odd idea!"

"It was my idea, Allen. She said she had something to tell me. I supposed she wanted money."

"Well," he said. "Did you see her?"

"No. She never showed up at all, Allen! I—I waited until seven!"

"Why didn't you ask her to meet you at the house?"

"At David's house? It didn't seem very sensible. David would probably be there—and I could hardly ask him to leave the room so that we could talk!"

"I see," he said. "Then when she didn't show up, what did you do?"

SHE looked at him strangely. "Whatever is the matter with you, Allen? All these questions! You sound like the District Attorney in a detective story! As a matter of fact, I went all over looking for Eric."

"Looking for him?"

"Yes, looking for him!" Suddenly she opened her handbag and brought out a little piece of paper which seemed to be a newspaper clipping. She thrust it into his hand.

"This was in the Sunday paper," she said, "I happened to see it."

He glanced at the clipping briefly, as if already knowing what it said, and then he laid it upon the top of the desk.

"So you have been looking for him," he said gently. "Where?"

"Everywhere! In all the old places! Then I drove up to the ranch!"

He did a strange thing. He closed his eyes. "Go on!" he said.

"I got there at about eight o'clock. Amelia wasn't there, but of course Kathie was. It's strange the way she seems to have second sight. She wasn't surprised. She was expecting me. She told me Eric wasn't there, before I could ask her. Then she asked how the baby was. I told her we were staying in town with David But there was something strange—she was keeping something from me—like the rest of you are."

"What do you mean, Mary Ellen?"

"You and David," she said, looking earnestly at the toes of her sandals. "Both of you are keeping something from me. I—I thought maybe it was something that Eva Singleton knew. That's why I arranged to meet her."

"Mary Ellen," he said gently. "You shouldn't have worried me so. I would have taken you to the ranch if you wanted to go. I didn't know that is what you wanted." He sighed.

"When I couldn't find you," he said gently, "I came down to the pier—and they had just taken a drowned woman out of the water. I—I thought it might be you. I went to the morgue and looked at her—"

"Oh, darling!" she said, looking up quickly, and I thought she was going to cry. "I'm sorry. I don't know why you bother with me!"

She stood up and touched him affectionately on the arm.

"Come," she said. "Let's get out of here!"

I saw how strained and distressed his face was as he extinguished the lamp. The flashlight was lighted once more, and I watched the two of them retreat along the companionway and disappear up the steps abaft the engine room.

For a moment longer I stayed rigidly silent, hearing the sound of the hatch being closed, and then the vanishing footsteps across the deck overhead. I was trembling with cold and relief that they had gone—and now I jumped out of bed and streaked into the dining salon in my slip and stockingless feet. I struck a match and scanned the clipping which had been left, discarded, upon the desk. It was an item from some sort of gossip column. All it said was: *Rumor has it that the anonymous author of "The Witches' Pool" has returned to Newport.*

I stood shivering there with the clipping in my hand.

Even I, who have a habit of getting behind in my reading, had heard of "The Witches' Pool." It was a current best-seller, a psychological shocker. I had not read it; but everybody knew that the motion picture rights had sold for a fabulous sum, and that the book sales had already skyrocketed into astronomical figures.

The author of the book was anonymous. There were those who hinted that it was a clever publicity device—and there were others who contended that the subject-matter was autobiographical, as well as libelous, and that the author feared for his life.

"Eric Conway!" I thought. "So he is the one who wrote it!"

Then I struck another match and opened the desk. The sealed envelope was addressed to "Eric" in a bold, beautiful hand. For several minutes I stood, in torment and indecision, suppressing a terrific desire to open it. My conscience won. I crumpled the clipping in my hand.

BY THIS TIME the midnight chill—which in Southern California in February is something for the Chamber of Commerce to ignore with studied indifference—had begun to seep into the

very narrow of my bones. I put the unopened note back into the desk and, blowing out my last match, crept into bed.

But I could not go to sleep. For a long while I lay staring into the familiar darkness remembering what I could about Eric Conway.

My curiosity about him four years ago had been restricted mainly to speculations about his ability as a navigator and yachtsman. A boat becomes very human and dear to its owner—and I remembered searching his charming face and deciding that he would do, that he would take good care of the *Paquita*.

Now I lay in the darkness trying to conjure him up out of the past. His was a strangely elusive face. I could remember only that it was sensitive and handsome, and unusually lined and seamed for his age, which could not have been more than twenty-five. I remembered also that he had a great deal of personal magnetism, which was immediately apparent and that I had had a curiously conflicting impression about his attitude toward his fiancée—this lovely girl—who so obviously adored him. I was not even sure that he loved her.

His voice I remembered very well.

"We are all going to Bermuda," he had told Tony and me. "Vinson, here, is going to paint. I'm going to write a book—" He had turned to Mary Ellen then. "I don't know why *you're* coming along, darling!" he had said to her, teasingly. And she had looked at him with her wide grey eyes and blushed.

I wondered how they had fared during these past four years—what the mystery was—why she had not seen him, and why she had written him a note. And who was this tense and worried man with the thinning gray hair and the proprietary manner?

Something was wrong here. I could not put the elusive Eric Conway out of my mind. And somewhere in the back of my thoughts there was the bullet hole in the galley cabinet.

For a long while I lay staring into the darkness. I had for the first time an uneasy feeling about the *Paquita*. She did not seem as cozy and familiar as she had seemed before. She was haunted by an uneasy ghost.

Finally, I went to sleep.

## III

IT WAS SUNLIGHT seeping in through the open porthole that finally awakened me. My eyes were heavy with sleep, and along with a vague and pleasant lassitude I had the impression that it was late. The still air which came in through the gently moving curtains was warm—like midday air.

My watch indicated seven o'clock and I lay staring at it incredulously for a few minutes, and then, putting it to my ear I confirmed a suspicion. It had stopped. I had forgotten to wind it.

"There's no way of guessing what time it is," I thought. "It must be late: at least ten or eleven o'clock!"

Getting out of bed I padded over to the lavatory between the two forward state-rooms. The thin, cold trickle that had come from the faucet last night was thinner now. I doused my handkerchief and bathed my face. Then I dressed quickly.

I took one wistful look around. How snug it all was in the bright light of noon!

Then after remaking the bunk and smoothing out the sailcloth coverlet, I took the quickest route out—as I had determined to do—looking neither to the right nor to the left as I went through the dining salon. From the closed desk the note beckoned me, but I disregarded it and went along the companionway.

Out on deck it was past noonday. I gauged my exit with great caution, listening for a moment at the opening of the hatch for the sound of the Coast Guard's launch, or for the footsteps of any stray loiterers about the quay. Then I vaulted the rail of the deck, and walked once more along the boardwalk, casual and unconcerned—looking about in a studiously aimless manner calculated not to attract attention.

I might just as well have saved myself the trouble, for at the first turn—at the corner of Pop Seely's bait shack—I ran right into Pop and his dog, Skipper, coming out of the doorway.

Both of them recognized me at once.

Skipper, who is some kind of black mixture with a white bib and a sheepdog's head, fell upon me with throaty barks of delight. Old Pop held my hand in his hard, knotty one.

"If it ain't little Echo Ware!" he croaked. "You been down having a look at the *Paquita*?"

"Yes, Pop, that's exactly what I've been doing. She looks very trim."

"That she does!" he said. He spit thoughtfully into the ocean. "She's been in two, three weeks. Back from Bermuda, I reckon. Been there all through the war. This Vinson fella that owns her—he's a British subject, I reckon, so he just stayed on there and painted pictures."

"What became of Mr. Conway?" I asked casually.

"Conway?"

"Eric Conway. He and Mr. Vinson bought the *Paquita* together," I murmured.

Pop scratched his head, trying to remember.

"Seems like I remember there was another fella," he said. "But I ain't seen hide nor hair of him. Never came back with the yawl. Guess he musta sold out to this Vinson fella."

"I suppose so," I said.

Pop was squinting thoughtfully at the horizon. He had always been a gossip, and I felt that he had something more to impart.

"I wonder what happened to him," I said, with elaborate nonchalance. "If I remember rightly he was going to Bermuda on his honeymoon—and to write a book. There was a pretty girl—a very pretty girl—who was going to marry him."

THERE WAS a pause in which we both turned and watched a gull wheel and dip close over our heads. Then Pop shook his head and spat with finality into the ocean. He changed the subject.

"What about the mister?" he asked with kindly concern.

"Tony's fine," I said. "He's coming home soon—I expect him almost at once! And I'm looking for a place to stay, Pop—a house—a room—anything. Do you know of anything?"

He considered for a moment.

"Well, you could rent the *Paquita*, I reckon," he said, just like that.

I was stunned into silence.

"This Vinson fella was speaking to me about it just the other day—said that if anyone wanted to rent it, and I knew 'em, and they was okay, to go ahead. He

left the key with me and told me to take the money and give a receipt."

And so, as simply as that, I rented the *Paquita*. The *Paquita* was all mine again—Tony's and mine—for the time being!

I wandered into the galley and examined the bullet hole again. I know nothing about ballistics (that is definitely Tony's department) but there is something thought-provoking about a bullet hole. The slug had not penetrated to the outside, but seemed still to be buried deep in the wood. It had drilled its way neatly into the bulkhead, and seemed to have been fired from a weapon of fairly high caliber.

"Tony will have a field day!" I thought. I could picture him digging it out and making absolutely accurate deductions about it.

From the galley I wandered aft and found that the master stateroom had evidently been used as a workshop. The beds had been removed and there was a work table across one side. In the closet I found an easel and a smock.

There was just one more souvenir of the former occupants. In the lavatory of the master stateroom there was a child's toy—a large wooden duck with a bedraggled ribbon about its neck. It had an ancient and much-loved look, and I knew that its little owner would be missing it.

I had gone shopping in Pop's rattletrap car and bought myself the basic necessities of a nautical life: blue denim jeans and some sweat shirts. I had retrieved my suitcase, too, from the roadside cafe where I had checked it; and I had filled the car up with all manner of supplies—everything from apples and breakfast food to kerosene for the cook stove.

I had also purchased a copy of "The Witches' Pool" from the local book store.

Stopping for a moment at the corner newsstand, I had bought a morning paper, and was surprised to see how little space had been given to the tragedy of the previous night. On page 2, under the headline, DEAD WOMAN FOUND IN NEWPORT BAY, there was the briefest account of the incident, with a description of the victim who remained unidentified. Mention was made of a coroner's inquest to be held in the near future.

On the way back I stopped at Pop's shack and asked him to come and help

me when he had time to spare, and then I went on back to the *Paquita*.

I spent the afternoon putting the *Paquita* to rights, and I can't remember when I've had a pleasanter time. Pop lumbered about doing odd jobs for me, and his dog, Skipper, padded after him—up and down, and around the decks.

When they had left for the day I lit the stove in the galley and prepared a feast of scrambled eggs and coffee. It was still early, but I was really hungry. I ate with the unseemly speed of those who dine alone. After that I got my coat and flashlight, and went out on deck.

Far out, beyond that clear horizon there must be a ship bringing Tony home. I lit a cigarette, smiling to myself. And then on impulse I vaulted the deck rail, and started for an evening stroll along the boardwalk.

**P**RESENTLY, like a criminal returning to the scene of his crime, I found myself walking in the direction of last night's tragedy. I knew I wanted to look again at the spot where I had found the poor drowned woman. I felt an urge to peer down along the mossy pilings of the pier into clear water in which nothing floated. And this I did.

When I reached the spot it was as deserted as before. I sat down for a few minutes, close to the place where the dead woman's shoe had been wedged, and lighting another cigarette I gazed out towards the dim outline of Santa Catalina Island.

I smoked and watched the island fade once more from view, and the rosy glow fade minute by minute from the sky. For company there was only the slim chaste moon brightening in the west.

And in the gloaming I saw the dim figure of a man walking towards me along the boardwalk.

There are bound to be strollers on the ocean front at any hour of day or evening, but I recall thinking that it had been thoughtless and imprudent of me to stay so long alone. I was vaguely frightened.

My first impulse was to scramble to my feet and start walking, but that would necessitate passing the man on the narrow walk. Instead, I tossed my cigarette into the water and sat very quietly wishing he would turn back.

Instead, he approached with careful casualness. When he was within speaking distance he stood still in the middle of the walk.

"Mary Ellen?" he said.

I turned my face towards him and said nothing. Then with distinct relief I recognized him as my visitor of the previous evening. So he was still in tireless pursuit of Mary Ellen!

The man was looking at me uncertainly, and now he made a stiff little bow. It was courtly and old-fashioned.

"I hope you will pardon me," he said. "I thought you were someone else!"

Then he seemed on the point of turning away. But instead, he stood there. He seemed to expect me to say something.

"There has been no one here," I said coldly. He hesitated.

"You must forgive me for saying so," he said, "but this is not altogether a safe place for a young woman to sit alone. Very soon it will be dark. The darkness falls so suddenly by the sea."

"Yes," I said. "Yes. I know. And thank you for being concerned about me. I shall leave soon."

"When it is dark," he went on in his odd, careful voice, "it is so easy to miss one's footing."

I made no reply. At another hour or in another place curiosity would have prompted me to encourage the man in conversation, but the eeriness of the surroundings made me feel uneasy. I wanted him to go away. All I really knew about him, besides the apparent fact that he was a gentleman, was that his name was "Allen" and that he knew the girl, Mary Ellen.

"A woman was drowned here only yesterday," he said.

"Yes, I know." I could hear the iciness in my own voice. "But you see, I shan't lose my footing. I have a flashlight with me."

I took the torch from my pocket and flashed it rather childishly at his feet. They were small feet encased in well-polished black oxfords. I still do not quite know why my action was so offensive to him, but I know that he was angered by it. He bowed again stiffly.

"Good evening, then," he said, and turning, he walked away.

He had been quite right. Darkness falls



suddenly by the sea. His figure was swallowed up in the gloaming, but I could hear his careful tread, for a time, retreating into the distance.

When there was silence again I sprang to my feet and hurried back along the boardwalk, guided by the bobbing light of my flashlight.

The air was growing chilly and damp by the time I reached the *Paquita*. I had met no one along the way, but as I turned off at the anchorage I saw a dim figure sauntering ahead of me in the direction of Pop's shack. Somehow I recognized it as the gentleman of my recent encounter.

ONCE aboard the *Paquita* I lit the lamp in the dining salon and stood there in the center of the room for some minutes, thinking. The cabin had once more a haunted air. Vignettes of the past two days presented themselves to my mind, and running through all of my thinking there was a tenuous thread of recollections about the mysterious Eric Conway.

There was the note which Mary Ellen had placed in the desk for him. I stepped to the desk and opened it.

But now the note was gone!

Some time during the interval between morning and the present moment the note had disappeared. I had left the hatch unlocked when I had gone for my stroll—but the note could have disappeared long before that.

It seemed exceedingly unlikely that Pop had taken it during the afternoon without mentioning it to me. But now I determined to ask him. This time I locked the hatch. I went directly to Pop's shack. He was there alone with Skipper.

The old man looked up with apparent pleasure when I walked in.

"Pop," I said, "there was some sort of a note in the desk in the dining salon. It was addressed to Mr. Conway. Did you see it?"

He scratched the back of his neck.

"No, little lady, I reckon I didn't."

"Well, it's gone. I thought perhaps someone had asked you to take it."

His old eyes looked at me with disarming candor. "I ain't seen it," he said doggedly.

It had been my intention to turn in early and get a good night's rest, but when

I returned to the *Paquita* I found that I was not sleepy.

Finally, I took from the shelf my copy of "The Witches' Pool," and settling myself in bed with the lantern adjusted for reading, I opened the book.

It was a well-bound volume, a much better printing job than the average wartime novel. The blurb on the jacket said nothing whatsoever about the author—simply that here was a novel of surpassing power and intensity, taken from a deep knowledge and understanding of the human soul and its hidden fears and desires—and that the author, for various understandable reasons, preferred to remain forever anonymous.

Then I turned to the first page and began to read:

"Many years from now when I am dust, people will remember me. People will speak my name, Delora Stefanie Grey, saying that I was ruthless and evil, and that I destroyed a man.

"This much is true. Yet where there is evil there must be a choice of good; and looking backwards now I see my life like a wide, straight highway leading always through stark and terrible country, with a shadowy bypath dropping away into obscurity and peace.

"I say this, not in my own defense, but only marveling that life is what it is . . ."

Then for the next five hours I was lost in a curious, pathological world of hate and repression through which the powerful figure of a woman named Delora moved like a pestilence and scourge. The style of writing was ornate, and sometimes I thought it very poor—but there were passages in which the words seemed to gush forth from the tormented heart of the author in a tumultuous outpouring; and at other times I, who seldom weep over a story, wept bitterly.

The plot of "The Witches' Pool" was, briefly, this: The girl, Delora, had been sent to live with relatives on a remote ranch in the hills of California. She became deeply infatuated with her host who was a widower, the father of an infant son. The man was true to the memory of his dead wife, and unresponsive to Delora's passionate devotion. Her po-

sition remained for several years that of housekeeper.

Close to the ranch there was a little graveyard through which a stream of water ran down to a polluted pool. The father had explained to his son that the water was undrinkable because it was magical water—and they called it Witches' Pool.

When the child was six a beautiful widow came to visit. Delora became aware that her host had fallen in love again at last. Deliberately she told the little boy, who was extremely jealous and devoted to his father, that if he would bring water from the magical pool and place it in the carafe in the visitor's room, his dead mother's spirit would cause her to vanish and they would no more be troubled by her presence.

The child filled the carafe daily from the polluted pool, and the visitor sickened and died of typhoid fever. But the child's father contracted it and died, also.

In after years the incident was forgotten, and the child's terror and guilt was buried deep in his subconscious mind. He grew up neurotic and bitter, and completely dominated by Delora whom he unconsciously needed because she alone shared the knowledge of his guilty experience. He resembled his dead father, and Delora found in her domination of the son the solace to her outraged pride.

When the boy fell in love Delora set about to destroy the romance. His sweetheart, however, stumbled upon some of the clues to his deep neurosis.

At the end of the book the boy is induced by his sweetheart to remember that someone had said that the water in the pool was magical, and that he had used it to make the unwanted visitor vanish; and so had caused the death of his father. The story ends with Delora going to the Witches' Pool for water with which to kill him, knowing that once he has begun to remember he will remember everything, and so be free of her.

I finished the book at about two o'clock in the morning, and having extinguished the lamp, lay staring into the darkness.

"Who was Delora?" I wondered. Whom could the anonymous author have hated so much? Was the author really Eric Conway, the sensitive and rather jaded young

man to whom we had sold the *Paquita*? And if it were he, could lovely Mary Ellen be the woman he hated so?

And, about the plot, was it merely a vehicle to carry the burden of his hate? Or was Delora really a murderess, with at least two deaths upon her conscience?

If she were truly a murderess, and the circumstances of the story were recognizable, there would be reason enough for the rumor that the author of "The Witches' Pool" was in fear of his life.

And then quite suddenly I sat up in bed.

"Perhaps something has happened to him!" I whispered aloud to the darkness. "Perhaps he is dead!"

#### IV

NEXT MORNING (it could not have been much later than ten o'clock) I had a visitor—two visitors, in fact.

I saw them coming along the boardwalk as I sat on the deck smoking my morning cigarette, with the copy of "The Witches' Pool" on my lap.

They came along hand in hand, the slim girl and the little tadpole of a child, both of them sun-bronzed and very handsome. The day was warm, and both wore bathing suits. Mary Ellen's was of white satin. It shimmered in the sun as she strolled towards me. Her brown hair fell to her waist. It was not soft, floating hair like mine, but straight-hanging and heavy.

When we were within smiling distance she smiled, and looked at me with eyes that were long and sea-blue and flecked with little amber shadows.

"Hello," said Mary Ellen. "I remember you. You are Mrs. Ware. David tells me that you've rented the *Paquita*. This is my little boy, Christopher."

"I want my duck," said Christopher.

He wore a tiny red bathing suit, not much bigger than a postage stamp.

"I'm so glad you came," I said to her. "I remember you, too, of course. You are Mrs. Conway."

Instantly I knew that I had said something wrong. She was blushing, exactly as I had remembered seeing her blush four years ago. She bent down quickly, busying herself with lifting Christopher aboard.

"Oh, no!" She said, "I'm—my name isn't Conway! I'm Mrs. Allen Brockman. But please call me Mary Ellen, won't you? Everyone does."

It was a bad moment.

"Christopher's duck is here," I said hurriedly. "I knew at once from the look of it that it would be greatly missed!"

She smiled at me, looking straight into my eyes in a disarming way she had.

"Yes," she said. "He's been desolate. I'll get it."

She started down the hatch before I could offer to find it for her.

Meanwhile, Christopher and I stood looking solemnly at each other. He was a beautiful child, about three years old, and he was the image of Eric Conway!

I was thinking of last night. She had called the thin elderly man "Allen", and she had also called him "darling". He was evidently Allen Brockman, her husband. But the child was Conway's!

When she came back up the steps she had the toy duck in her hand. She gave it to Christopher absently, and then lit a cigarette.

"You must be happy to be back once more on the *Paquita*," she said softly.

"Yes," I said, "and I wish she were ours again!"

She blew some smoke at the horizon.

"Perhaps David would sell her."

"Do you think so?"

Mary Ellen shrugged.

"He might," she said. "He has little use for her now that he's home; but I really don't know. He hasn't expressed any sentiments about the matter—or if he has, I haven't heard them. You see, my husband and I have just come down for a visit, and we're staying with David. We haven't seen him in four years."

"Then—" I had started to say, "Then you haven't been with him in Bermuda!" But I swallowed my words in time. She turned and looked at me very levelly again with those nice eyes of hers, and suddenly there was friendship between us.

"No," she said, smiling a little, and having read my thoughts. "I did not go to Bermuda. There was an awful quarrel. David and Eric left aboard the *Paquita* without me."

We smoked in silence for a moment.

"I haven't seen Eric since—since that

time—since we quarrelled," she said, very softly.

"When I came aboard yesterday," I said, "there was a note in the desk in the dining salon. But it isn't there now. It was addressed to 'Eric.'"

SOMEHOW, I knew that she had gone to the cabin for the purpose of retrieving the note. The duck had been an excuse. She had been too quick and purposeful. And it meant, of course, that someone else had come aboard yesterday and taken it.

She turned her eyes to look at me searchingly.

"I didn't take it," I said, "and I don't know who did. It simply disappeared. It could have disappeared any time between morning and early evening. All I know is that I went for a stroll after supper, and when I returned the note was gone."

"That is strange," she said. Then after a hesitation, "I left it there for Eric. There was something I wanted to tell him—and I thought possibly he might come here."

"I asked Pop Seely about the note," I said, "thinking that perhaps someone had told him to get it. But he denied all knowledge of it."

A strange little frown furrowed her smooth forehead.

She seemed on the point of leaving, and I saw her eyes flick over a copy of "The Witches' Pond" which was lying upon the settee. She changed the subject abruptly.

"Christopher and I are going to spend the afternoon on the beach," she said, "and I am sure David is alone. It's a fine opportunity for you to beard him in his den—about the *Paquita*. He has moods. He might be in the mood to sell!"

"Thank you for telling me!" I said. "I shall borrow Pop Seely's jalopy and drive up there."

She blew smoke at the horizon.

"Don't thank me, Echo," she said. "The *Paquita* is a lovely yawl, and I know how you feel about her; but I'll be happy never to see her again. For me she's a nightmare and a bad memory."

"I'm sorry," I said.

After another pause she turned to face me again.

"There's something else I must tell you," she said. "It is why I came—" Her face flushed again. "It's—it's about Eric Con-

way. There is someone—a woman—who has been trying to get in touch with him. She talked to me on the telephone yesterday, and I arranged to meet her—but there was a misunderstanding, somehow, and she didn't appear. And I thought—I thought if she should come here looking for him—it might simplify things if you would be kind enough to give her a message."

"You see," she went on haltingly. "I know the circumstances — she evidently needs money. She was a servant. I—I would rather attend to the matter myself than have her getting in touch with—with everyone—looking for Eric."

She looked at me almost imploringly. The slim brown hand holding the cigarette shook. "Nobody seems to know where he is," she said, very softly.

We stood staring at each other for a moment, and I remember thinking to myself, "She still loves him!"

"Since we are staying with David Vinson," she went on, "I thought—perhaps you would be kind enough to ask her to set a time and place—and I will manage to meet her anywhere — anywhere she wishes!"

"What is her name?"

"It's Eva Singleton."

"I'll do what I can."

"There's one more thing," she said. "If you will be so kind—as to tell her—that it will be to her advantage not to speak to anyone else—especially not to disturb my husband about the matter!"

"Yes."

"You must think it all very strange," she said, "and I suppose it is!" Although her face was deeply flushed and her hand trembled, she stood very straight and smiled into my eyes. I smiled back at her.

"You are very kind," she said.

Then they left. She lifted Eric Conway's son over the deck rail, and I watched them trotting away along the wooden plank-ing, two charming, sun-bronzed figures—carrying between them a large toy duck.

DAVID VINSON'S house was perched high upon a hillside within the town limits of Laguna Beach, a distance of about six miles as the gull flies, from the *Paquita's* mooring at Newport.

The house was built upon a slope just

below the road, so that only the top of the roof showed; and I missed it entirely the first time and chugged on up the winding grade with the wonderful view of the sea and the rocks and the little coves far below.

Then, looking down, I chanced to see the house lying close against the hillside, and smoke which somehow I had not seen before, drifting lazily up from its chimney.

"That's it," I thought, "with the great northern window! It must be the place!" I turned the car while my heart began to pound with a mounting excitement out of all proportion to the occasion. I had a feeling that I was on the threshold of an exciting adventure.

The paved path led down from the road to the front door, and then continued around the side of the house. I knocked loudly, thinking that the man had certainly chosen for himself and his work a secluded eyrie. Nobody responded to the first knock, and if it had not been for Mary Ellen's words I think that I would have started away. But I tried again and waited. After the third knock the door was thrown open abruptly and David Vinson stood before me.

He, too, was deeply sun-tanned and was clad only in swimming trunks and sneakers. I had obviously interrupted him at his work, for his hair was standing on end, and in his hand he held a paint brush.

He was trying to conceal his intense irritation, and for an instant we stared into each other's faces.

Vinson was a handsome man—tall and greying, and perhaps fifty. If his nose was perhaps too large, and his chin a trifle too delicate for the most conventional standards of masculine good looks, these slight irregularities were overcome by the great distinction of his bearing. He revealed now a set of magnificent teeth—in the coldest of smiles.

"Yes?" he said.

"Please forgive the interruption, Mr. Vinson," I said, "I've come to speak to you about the yawl, *Paquita*."

Vinson looked both surprised and, I thought, a trifle relieved. I had the feeling that he had expected me to be someone else.

"I'm sorry," he said. "The *Paquita* isn't available for charter. She's been rented."

"That I know," I said, smiling my best smile. "You see, I'm the one who rented her. My name is Echo Ware."

He looked at me sharply.

"But of course!" he said, his manner stilted and courtly. "I remember your lovely face, but I could not recall— If there is anything wrong you need not have come here. Pop Seely, at the bait shack, will attend to anything, or you could have communicated with me by mail."

"Yes, I know," I said, "but there's nothing wrong, only something I want to discuss—and I felt that it called for a personal interview."

I remember thinking to myself that I liked him. But afterwards I wondered whether it was the man, himself, who was likable—or whether it was simply his air of distinction and good breeding. He had the assurance of great accomplishment.

He seemed to hesitate. Then he moved aside from the doorway and I stepped into a large and pleasant room where he had been working.

A canvas stood upon an easel by the northern window which I had seen from the hill. There was a precise neatness about the studio, almost an air of austerity.

He murmured something about getting a robe, and left the room for a moment.

I sat down upon a divan by the fireplace and looked about. A red and blue wooden toy truck lay upon its side on the floor, but there were no other evidences of the Brockman family.

A number of finished canvases were stacked in one corner of the studio, but there were few hanging upon the walls. These few, however, showed considerable versatility. One was an oil painting of three negroes walking along a straight road in a blazing, tropical light. Their costumes were bright, with touches of dazzling white. They walked with magnificent grace, and upon the head of each there was a basket.

I LOOKED at the next picture and caught my breath. It was a painting of Mary Ellen, very tan and young, with straight-hanging hair. She was wearing a blue dress and leaning back against a tree with her arms drawn shyly behind her—but she looked steadily into the eyes of

the beholder, and in her own blue eyes there was the wisdom of all womenkind.

"What does he think of her?" I wondered to myself. "What is he trying to say?"

In the alcove beyond there was a third picture which I could not see distinctly. It was a pencil sketch of a young man—a poet, perhaps.

And over the fireplace there was an oil painting of the *Paquita*. I clasped my hands together in my lap and gazed at it. It was an inspired thing. Vinson had caught the loveliest angle of all, with the bow pointing into the foreground, and the tall mast leaning into the sky—a hot, tropical sky with no breeze stirring.

"How perfect it is!" I thought, my heart full of love for the slim, white yawl.

David Vinson had wrapped himself in a terry cloth robe, and now he came back into the room and stood before the fireplace, obviously waiting for me to get on with my business and get out.

"Well?" he said. His cold eyes said very clearly that he was unmoved by beauty or youth. To him these were the commodities with which he worked.

"I want to buy the *Paquita*," I said at once.

He shook his head.

"She is not for sale."

"That I know," said I, "But, you see—most people have their price about most things—and I thought that perhaps I could meet yours for the *Paquita*. She belonged to us, and now my husband is coming home. I want her badly, or I would not have come here to disturb you."

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I couldn't sell the *Paquita*. I haven't title to her, you see." He stopped, in order to choose his words carefully. "Actually, she is mine. I have paid Mr. Conway for his half-interest. It was all rather sudden. We were to take a trip together to Bermuda—and then he decided not to go. And so I paid him the money—not a very clever business deal, I suppose, but we were friends—and I neglected to get a clear title to the boat."

Looking at his face it seemed to me that he drew a curtain across it. It became completely expressionless now.

"I can understand why you might be reluctant to part with the *Paquita*," I murmured.

He shrugged his fine shoulders.

"On the contrary," he said, "I have no sentiment about the boat at all. It is simply that I have no intention of disturbing Conway about the matter."

"May I ask why?"

"He's—he's in seclusion writing a book," he said.

"And does he intend to remain in seclusion indefinitely?"

"Yes," said David Vinson quietly, "indefinitely."

## V

I STOOD up. There is a variety of temper that goes with my red hair. I had no right to be there at all, however, and I felt that I did not have the privilege of being angry. Now the earnestness in David Vinson's voice caused me to turn.

"The creation of any kind of work is, in my opinion, sacred," he said. "I feel that way about Conway—however trivial his books have been in the past."

"Yes, of course!" I said contritely.

I had been moving discreetly toward the door, and now found myself in front of the pencil sketch in the alcove. It was, I perceived now, a sketch of Eric Conway as a very young man. The face was somehow tragic but exceedingly handsome, and more vulnerable than I remembered.

"Oh!" I said.

Vinson smiled.

"It's an old sketch," he said, "one of my early ones of Eric. I like it, myself—it has a quality—which was there in the face then—I did dozens of sketches of him in those days. He was a wonderful subject—challenging to a portrait painter! Usually the old are more interesting than the young. Youth—bah! Prettiness! It is the lines of sorrow, hate, suffering—that make a face interesting. But this boy—he was living under terrific emotional conflict at the time—and his face was as changing as the sea—from minute to minute—I never could work fast enough to catch it all."

Vinson had become warm and human for a moment.

"It's a marvelous face," I said, stammering a little. "What was he writing then? What has he written? I don't seem to remember having read anything—"

"Oh," he said, "nothing of any consequence, really. I'm afraid that out of all that terrific conflict nothing much emerged—half a dozen trashy novels." He smiled wryly. "Every year, it seemed, the mountain labored mightily and brought forth—but definitely—a mouse."

I decided to fling a bombshell.

"Strange, isn't it," I murmured, "a face like that—and nothing comes of it! One would think that the mind behind it would produce something sensational—like 'The Witches' Pool'!"

He looked surprised. For an instant it seemed to me that he was very angry, but the look—if it was there at all—was gone before I could be sure.

"I'm not acquainted with the title," he said casually.

"It is an anonymous novel," I went on, "a psychological job—very interesting."

He shook his head.

"We painters," he said, "don't have much time for reading. I find that I must spare my eyes."

I was busily drawing on my driving gloves, avoiding his searching glance.

"You've been very patient, Mr. Vinson," I said, "and I hope that you will forgive me for my persistence about the *Paquita*."

"Not at all," he answered in his courtly manner. "I am sorry that I cannot help you. But truly, I can do nothing about it. Nothing at all. Good-bye, Mrs. Ware."

ON MY WAY back to the *Paquita* I stopped at a bookstore in Newport and discovered that Eric Conway was, indeed, a writer who had written and published novels under his own name.

The intellectual-looking person behind the counter peered at me over glasses.

"Oh, yes," she said, disapprovingly, "Eric Conway."

She went to a section of shelves directly under a large sign which read, LOVE—ROMANCE, and waved her hand at a row of gaudily jacketed novels.

"Those," she said with a sniff, "are Mr. Conway's."

I browsed among them for a moment, while the woman stood at my elbow.

"He used to be a sort of local character," she said. "I think he lived on a ranch in the hills—somewhere off the Laguna Canyon road. We used to see him riding into

town on horseback sometimes—but that was several years ago. An elderly woman rode with him."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know," she said.

The titles of Eric Conway's novels seemed to run to use of the word "passion", and the colorful jackets bore graphic descriptions of men and women in evening attire, locked in frantic embraces. The volume which I found myself holding in my hand was entitled "The Absent Husband" and, sure enough, there on the jacket were the two clandestine lovers in each other's arms. In the background a third ominous figure in an opera hat stood in the doorway, his elongated shadow falling before him aslant the floor.

"Do people buy these things?" I inquired.

The woman sniffed.

"He hasn't written anything for several years," she said, "but they still sell like hotcakes. It is like whodunits, you know—one wouldn't read one oneself, would one? But there are some—."

"Inferior minds," I murmured.

"Exactly!"

We smiled at each other with superior understanding of the weaknesses of others. Then I earned her undying disapproval.

"I'll take this one!" I said.

After that I stopped at the Western Union office to leave my new address, and they handed me a cablegram. It was from Tony, and all it said was: "HOLD EVERYTHING I AM DELAYED INDEFINITELY. LOVE, TONY."

Whenever I had looked out towards sea I had thought that somewhere out there—beyond the curve of the horizon there was a ship heading this way, bringing him home.

Now I felt too miserable to go back to the yawl. I drove Pop Seely's car to the headlands, and sat in it for hours, thinking. Everything was different now. I knew too well about these "indefinite" delays. They went on and on.

I sat there, smoking entirely too many cigarettes, until almost sunset. As I smoked I thought of Eric Conway.

He had been living here, in the hills, riding into town on his horse, a colorful and rather romantic figure. And now he was gone. The girl he had been on the

point of marrying was married to someone else. The child he had fathered did not bear his name. The yawl he had purchased was no longer his. The book he had apparently written had been published anonymously.

Nothing seemed to remain of Eric Conway but the row of gaudily jacketed pulp novels in the book shop — and "The Witches' Pool," Staring out over the horizon I thought about it.

"Just because it has been published within the year," I thought to myself, "does not prove that it was written recently. It could have been published by someone else—after his death."

This growing conviction that Eric Conway was dead had been founded upon very slight evidence—very slight—but there had been nothing whatsoever to refute it. Even the fact that David Vinson could not obtain title to the *Paquita* might be another indication that my suspicions were just.

Other things happened to people besides death—worse things, sometimes. But it seemed unlikely that if Eric Conway were alive, he would exist in a vacuum. He had been too colorful, too charming and magnetic a person to have vanished from the circle of his friends without a trace.

"Someone must know what has happened to him," I thought. "someone who is willing to tell."

Sitting there in Pop Seely's little car I thought of the ranch Mary Ellen had spoken of, during that conversation I had overheard in the dining salon. She had said she looked for Eric in "all the old places" and then she had driven out to "the ranch". It had been in the evening, and she had returned to the *Paquita* a little after ten o'clock.

"The ranch can't be very far away!" I thought.

Then there was the woman in the book shop who had spoken of a ranch in the hills behind Newport. Eric Conway had lived there, she said, riding occasionally into town on his horse.

I tossed my cigarette stub out of the car window and sat very still remembering something. There was a ranch, also, in the novel, "The Witches' Pool."

"It is the same ranch!" I said aloud.

I knew these hills quite well. There is a livery stable in Corona del Mar (which



is between Newport and Laguna Beach). Tony and I used to hire horses there in the old days and ride for miles over the surrounding country.

Vaguely out of the past I remembered a stream. Any stream in Southern California is a rarity, and this one trickled through a little valley beyond the first range of hills. I recalled crossing a wooden bridge which was posted with a warning to the effect that the waters of the stream were undrinkable. Tony and I had commented upon it and wondered where the stream came from, but we had never traced it to its source.

"Tomorrow I will go there!" I thought to myself, driving back to the *Paquita* in the late afternoon light. I was impatient already for the morning. I felt very certain that if I could find the stream again, it would lead me to an old graveyard.

WHEN I returned to the yawl I had a startling and rather revolting experience. I had locked up before leaving, and now I saw as I came aboard that there was a package for me which had been left on deck.

A cardboard carton had been tied with heavy twine, and had been shoved against the hatch. There was something rather baleful about it.

I stood there looking at it for a moment, and then with misgivings I untied the knot in the twine, and opened the box.

It contained, among desultory bits of grass and dry leaves, the delicate, almost lacy skeleton of a cat. Upon it there reposed an envelope addressed to "Mrs. Ware".

After the first recoil and the involuntary gasp I reached into the box and opened the note.

*My dear, it said, curiosity killed this poor creature. But you are so much wiser than the cat. You will leave at once—go back to where you came from—before it is too late.*

I stood there trembling, more with anger than revulsion now.

My first impulse was to heave the horrid package overboard, and this I did. And it proved to have been an unwise impulse, for the carton managed to cradle itself, somehow, underwater in the anchor chain. From there it was still glimmering at me

reproachfully on the next morning. But that is beside the point.

After my red-headed burst of anger I stood there, irresolutely, wondering what best to do. I wanted badly to tell someone about it. I considered telling Pop Seely.

"No," I thought at last, still standing there. "This is the work of a crank. A harmless crank. I shall discuss it with no one! I shall ignore it!"

But I locked the hatch at once when I went below. I had no inclination to walk in the evening weather. And my appetite had suddenly vanished.

For a while I sat rather dismally in the galley drinking a cup of warmed-over coffee and staring at the note which was spread out before me. It had been printed in pencil on an ordinary sheet of white paper. Suddenly I remembered my pointed remark to David Vinson about Eric Conway and "The Witches' Pool."

"I wonder if Vinson could have done this!" I thought.

And somehow I did not put it past him. "After all," I thought, "it is more than likely that he does not want me here! Pop rented the *Paquita* to me without stopping to consult Vinson. I suppose he thinks I have come here to pry. Well, and so I have!"

Later, with an effort at self-discipline, I crawled into bed and settled down with the masterpiece which I had bought from the disapproving bookstore clerk—"The Absent Husband." But it did not hold my interest. As a matter of fact, it was too stupid to endure.

"This," I said aloud, finally, "is utter trash!"

Flinging the book into a corner I turned out the lantern and presently I went to sleep; and when I slept I dreamed.

In my dream the *Paquita* was ours again and we were cruising to Bermuda. But there were complications. Mary Ellen had come along and brought Christopher with her, causing us no end of embarrassment.

There was the bullet hole in the back of the grocery cabinet down in the galley. It went right through the bulkhead, and the wind whistled through it in a dismal fashion and blew the cabinet door open again and again. Tony tried to fix it while Mary Ellen was not present, but she always appeared suddenly in the doorway

of the galley—just when Tony was busy plugging up the hole.

We pretended not to see her. When it was mended the wind would blow the plug out again, and there was the whole sorry business to do over again. Finally Tony lost his temper.

"Why the devil did you have to shoot him?" he shouted in exasperation, and Mary Ellen put her hands over her face and sobbed heart-breakingly.

That was the end of the dream. I seemed destined never to have a good night's sleep aboard the *Paquita*. After that I tossed and turned, listening to imaginary sounds on the deck above, until morning.

## VI

IN THE MORNING I went to Pop Seely's shack to borrow his jalopy. I met him at the door. He was dressed in his "good" suit, and looked harassed and old.

"I'm late for the coroner's inquest," he said. "It's about that woman that got herself drowned off the boardwalk."

I hurried along beside him.

"They just identified the body," he said. "I had to go over and have a look at her yesterday, but she ain't nobody that's ever been around here before. I told them that. What you want with the car?"

"I thought I'd drive down to the livery stable," I said innocently. "It's a fine day for riding."

"It is that."

He had been handsomely tipped the last time I borrowed his car, and I knew that his thrifty old mind was overcoming the present obstacles. He scratched his head thoughtfully.

"You come along with me," he said, "and when the inquest is over I'll drop you at the stables."

We got into the jalopy.

"The poor woman's been lying in the morgue all this time," said Pop, "without a tag on her. So finally her landlady seen the description in the paper and come in and identified her."

"Who was she, Pop?"

"The dead woman? Deputy coroner told me over the telephone, but a customer was banging on the counter and hollering for service and I didn't catch it."

The inquest was held in the local under-

taking establishment at ten o'clock. We were late, and we tiptoed in and sat in the back row of chairs.

Pop sat beside me breathing noisily and smelling of tobacco and fish. The proceedings were already launched, but I turned about discreetly and saw among the witnesses a stout woman of about fifty-five wearing a tiny tall hat with a beau-catcher veil. I guessed—and rightly—that she was the identifying witness. The man seated beside her seemed somehow familiar. Then I did a double-take and saw to my astonishment that he was David Vinson.

We had come in while the autopsy surgeon's report was being read. It established death by drowning as a result of a blow upon the head which had caused severe concussion and rendered the victim unconscious.

The possibility was expressed that the deceased person had fallen into the water and struck her head against a protrusion in the foundation of the pier.

The body had been submerged for an hour or two, and it was difficult to say definitely that there had been no evidence of a struggle prior to the woman's plunge into the water. Nor was it possible to determine whether or not she had been pushed, or whether she had received the head wound at the hands of an unidentified assailant prior to the fall.

That was the end of the report. The identifying witness was then called.

She moved forward and was sworn in, trembling with nervousness but pleased, too, by her importance as the deceased person's landlady. Then she sat down, and pushed the veil back from her hat. The deputy coroner addressed her.

"Please state your name."

"Mrs. Bessie Blew."

It came as such a shock to me that I sat there for a moment, my mind a blank.

THE deputy coroner asked her occupation, and she stated that she was a dressmaker, and that she rented the spare bedroom of her cottage to summer roomers. I sat there, staring.

After she had launched upon her story Mrs. Blew forgot her fears and seemed to enjoy the occasion. "I've never been one to pry into the affairs of a tenant," said she, "but when she came to my door I was

surprised. My sister had sent her to me and I'd expected a younger woman. My sister knows that I like to have young folks about and this lady wasn't young."

It seems that Mrs. Blew's lack of enthusiasm for her tenant had been returned, and there had been no conversation between the two women except a slight unpleasantness over a telephone call which the tenant had placed immediately upon arrival.

"She walked right into my bedroom and put in a call while I was out in the yard hanging up some stockings," said Mrs. Blew. "When I came back into the house she was on the phone. She asked for someone named Eric but he wasn't there. I went out of the room politely and waited until she was through. Then I told her she didn't have the privilege of using the phone without my permission, and she said something snippy to me, and went right on dialing another number! I don't know what she said because she shut the door in my face!"

The deputy coroner looked pained.

"Can you tell the court anything more?" he prompted.

"No, sir, that was all."

"Was that the last time you saw her?"

"Yes."

"What was she wearing?"

"She was wearing the same brown suit she had on when—when I identified the body."

"And you do not know where she was going?"

"No, I do not."

"Did she, to your knowledge, receive any visitors?"

"Well, she was only around for an hour, sir—never even unpacked her suitcase." She paused. "Someone came asking for her during the evening—a grey-haired woman. But of course the deceased was not there—I—I—suppose she was already dead."

"State only what you know," admonished the deputy coroner.

"Well, all I know is, I told the woman she could do as she pleased about waiting. I said she could go around to the side and wait in the room if she wanted to. We never lock our doors. I guess she waited for a while. I heard her moving around in there. I didn't see her leave, but—"

"Did she state her name?"

"No, she didn't, sir. I'll confess I was a bit short with her and I didn't ask her name. I was so mad about the telephone calls and all. But I'd know the woman if I ever saw her again. She was heavy-set, and she wore a flowered scarf around her head. I guess her eyes were black—very dark, anyhow. She had a nice voice and real nice manners—but maybe a little put on—sort of stagey. I would know her voice again."

"Did she ask for the deceased by name?"

Mrs. Blew hesitated, and a furrow appeared between her brows.

"Well," she said, "no. She asked to see 'Miss Eva Singleton'. That was the name she asked for. So I said, 'Maybe you mean the new tenant, Mrs. Ware', and she smiled very pleasantly and said, 'Oh, perhaps she goes by that name.'"

"How did you know that her name was Ware and not Singleton?"

Mrs. Blew seemed rather exasperated.

"Because she told me her name over the telephone when she reserved the room. She called me on the long distance telephone the day before she got here, and she sounded real nice over the phone. She spelled her name out for me: Mrs. Anthony Ware—"

Somehow I got to my feet. "There has been a mistake," I said. "I am Mrs. Anthony Ware." After that I was sworn in, and took the stand.

WHAT I told the deputy coroner and the jury was this: that I had sat next to a woman on the bus who had mentioned that she was on her way to Newport to look up a friend. She had stated that she was a nurse, and that she had stayed in Newport in the past.

"I mentioned to her that I had reserved a room at Mrs. Blew's house," I said, "and this woman—whose name was unknown to me—took it instead."

The deputy coroner turned in his chair and gave me a searching look.

"Where are you living now?"

"I am staying aboard the yawl, *Paquita*, which is moored in Newport Harbor."

"Is it close to the spot where the deceased was found?"

"Yes, it is. Quite close."

He seemed to be on the point of saying

something more, but after a brief pause he passed his hand thoughtfully over his face and explained to the court that the inquest was at an end. It would be reopened at a later date, pending proper identification of the deceased person.

Then Pop and I were threading our way through the knot of people that stood about outside the doorway of the mortuary.

I recall that several heads were turned in my direction. People were talking in groups. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Mrs. Blew standing at the edge of the crowd looking about uncertainly, and David Vinson making his way towards her.

Pop Seely pushed me gently in the opposite direction. We walked in silence back to the jalopy and got in.

"I dunno," he said suddenly. "It will come out in the next inquest—about you being the one that found the body, and all. What you ought to do, you ought to clear out of here quick and go back where you came from!"

I stared at him in astonishment.

"What do you mean—'go back where I came from'?"

He looked uncomfortable.

"It ain't safe here."

"Why not?"

Pop rubbed the back of his neck.

"Being all alone down there on the yawl—it ain't safe."

"You're right, Pop. I *am* alone."

"It ain't safe," he repeated.

"I know it, but there's nothing I can do about it."

I had an impulse to tell him everything—about staying aboard the *Paquita* that first night because there was nowhere else to stay. I wanted to tell him about the dead cat, too, and the warning. Then I thought about the note to Eric that had disappeared. I wondered whether, after all, Pop had taken it because someone had tipped him to do so. I had an uncomfortable feeling that perhaps I could not trust Pop.

## VII

THE RIDE FROM Corona del Mar was very pleasant. There had been a recent rain, and the fields stretching inland for miles along the Coast Highway were showing new green and the thin

chartreuse mist of mustard coming into flower.

At the stables I had rented a pinto named Star—with a star in the middle of his forehead. He had a nice gait and an endearing way of turning his ears when I talked to him—which I did. Star and I covered the first five miles of rolling country in very good time. Sometimes we passed vacant Japanese farms with their idle fields and their long unpainted barns and outbuildings. Sometimes we flushed a covey of quail, and several times a meadow lark sprang straight up before us and poised in midair overhead beating his wings and uttering a bubbling song.

After a while the land rose slowly to a crest, and undulated in a series of little hills. Here were the old farms of long ago with their vegetable fields and their groves.

In earlier times this had been wheat country; and the Indians who worked the fields had walked these same trails to the missions.

The noonday sun was warm when I rode down into a coulee and found the little sluggish stream that I had remembered. It threaded its lazy, unwholesome way for miles along the valley floor, and whenever it crossed a road there was a posted warning that its waters were contaminated and unfit for human use.

By midafternoon I reached the first objective of my search. I found the graveyard beside the stagnant pool. It was in an enchanting spot, encircled by trees, and having the dreaming air of old, deserted places.

So close to the water's edge that it was reflected in the pool, there stood a single white marble tomb, beautiful and costly.

Star rested in the shade, cropping the grass beyond the old wall while I wandered among the tombstones in the inland heat, amid the droning of invisible insects, and the faint odor of the pool.

Some of the graves were very old, outlined with wooden pickets and bearing Spanish names and Latin inscriptions. There was a newer section; and there I found the headstones of "Robert Guy Conway, 1886-1924," and "Annette Conway, Beloved Wife, 1892-1920."

Both graves were decorated with wilting flowers, arccissus and china lilies, that had been placed there not earlier than yester-

day. I stood looking about me for the third grave, the grave of Robert Conway's fiancée who had died of fever, but I could not find it.

But the date on the lovely white marble tomb was 1924. I knew that it must be hers. There was in the inscription: "Lydia Combs Hawthorne, 1902-1924."

I tried the heavy bronze doors but they were locked.

"So here you are, poor Lydia," I thought, "dead of typhoid at the age of twenty-two. And Robert sleeps again at the side of his wife, but you sleep alone in your splendor."

Acting upon some obscure and sentimental impulse I took one of the wilting flowers from Robert Conway's grave and placed it at the portals of Lydia's lonely white monument.

Then I remounted Star and rode to the top of the knoll, and looking down, saw the ranch house close against the side of the hill, with the great liveoak tree before it. Even from where I was I could see that the hoary old trunk had been split by lightning.

I rode slowly down the hill towards it.

The Conway ranch was beautiful. It was an adobe structure, long and low, with a second story margined with a wooden balcony, extending part way along one end. It lay snugly against the hill, and had an air of having been there a long, long time.

After tethering Star to a tree I stood looking at the house for some minutes in admiration.

Nobody was in sight. In an open shed at one side a horse swung its head around and whinnied softly at Star. A battered cat walked sedately towards me; and there came from the back of the house the rhythmical sound of an axe falling upon wood.

There was no response to my knock, and I walked around the side of the house, feeling a bit stiff in the joints from my unaccustomed exercise, but still able to admire the neat espalier fruit trees coming into blossom along the South wall, and a bed of narcissus and china lilies along the walk—the same flowers that I had found strewn upon the three graves.

"It all has the look, somehow," I thought, "of something out of a book!" And then

I thought to myself how ironically true this was.

NEAR the kitchen door an old negress of massive proportions was chopping wood. She straightened up when I appeared around the corner, and wiped her face, her forehead, and the wattles under her chin, with a bandana handkerchief. All the while she was eyeing me suspiciously but without surprise.

Her opening remark was a great help.

"They ain't here—neither of them," she said. "Miz Amelia, she gone to stay over mebbe four, five days. Miz Kathie she out for a walk."

I decided to drift with the tide of her conversation.

"Thank you," I said. "When is Miss Kathie coming back?"

"She back soon now, yes'm."

She had the inherent courtesy of her race.

"You is friends with Miz Kathie?" she asked mildly.

I untied the scarf from around my head, and shook out my wind-blown hair so that it fell free about my shoulders.

"Never met her in my life," I said.

The old negress continued to study me without rudeness. "You Miz Amelia's friend, mebbe?" she persisted in a voice as soft as silk.

"No, I'm not."

"Mebbe you one of Mista Eric's women?"

I had to smile.

"Well, no," I said, "not exactly! I'm acquainted with him, but I happen to be married."

"You married, honey?" She placed her hands upon her mighty hips and began to chuckle. "That ain't never stopped Mista Eric! Not if I ever knowed him!"

Still chuckling she picked up the wood, and we went into the house, through the big kitchen, through the narrow central hall, and into the "parlor".

There she busied herself with building a fire on the hearth.

I stood in the middle of the room looking about me. It was cozy, quaint and charming. Over the old rosewood piano there hung an oil painting of a young woman. The hair was red, but not like mine. This was the Rubens type, with skin

like mother-of-pearl, and a tendency towards fleshiness. I knew that in later life the subject of the portrait would be fat.

The wonderful hair was parted over a nose that was thick and formidable with flaring, triangular nostrils. The eyes were almost triangular, too, with an interesting tendency to curl upward at the corners. It was a conceited face, and predatory, and full of strong animal spirit. What beauty there was in it was not spiritual. The evening dress and the hair arrangement with puffs over the ears, placed it in the early nineteen twenties.

The negress blew upon the fire. "It warm now," she paused to explain, "but it get cool quick here."

"Yes, I know."

"Miz Kathie, she ain't so young any more—she like her fire right now when she git in, and a cup of tea!"

"Don't we all!" I said.

She got slowly to her feet. "I fetch the tea," she said.

I followed her back through the hallway into the wonderful old kitchen, and perched upon a table, out of the way.

"This is a lovely house," I said. "Who is the lady in the picture over the piano?"

"Oh, her? Dat Miz Amelia."

"It's a very good picture," I said making conversation.

She chuckled. "Miz Amelia, she set great store by that picture, yes'm! She send for a man all the way from San Diego to paint it—she that conceited!"

"Oh!"

"Yes'm. She fancy herself quite a beauty them days! But she never catch herself a gentleman friend. Not her! The menfolks they run like the devil after them!"

She lit the old wood stove, chuckling to herself.

"What is her name?" I asked.

"Miz Amelia, honey? She Mista Eric's daddy's relation. Her name Conway."

"Of course," I said. "I didn't know."

"Miz Kathie," continued the negress, filling the tea kettle, "she Mista Eric's mamma's relation. Her name Calvert."

**T**HERE WAS A PAUSE during which she crooned to herself and I swung my feet idly over the edge of the table.

"And what's your name?" I asked.

"My name Feeba."

"And I'm Mrs. Ware—Echo Ware."

"Ain't never heard Mista Eric speak 'bout you, Miz Echo," said Feeba.

"No, I suppose not. Have you been here long?"

Feeba snorted. "Lordy, honey, I been with Mista Eric since he just a young child, before his mamma die. I been with him all the time!"

"I suppose you miss him dreadfully now that he's away," I said. Feeba made no reply. The set of her shoulders as she split open English muffins and spread them with sweet butter, told me that something was wrong.

"He's been away a long while, hasn't he, Feeba?"

"Yes'm."

She was fumbling with the cups and saucers, placing them on a wicker tray.

"Where did he go?"

"Honey, I expect I don't know," she said. "I don't rightly know nothing for sure!"

"Well," I said, swinging my feet, "I supposed that he had gone to Bermuda to write a book. That's where he told me he was going."

"My land! He tell you that, honey? When he tell you that?"

"Oh," I said, "about four years ago, I think."

"Dat boy!" said Feeba reminiscently, "he *never* tell the truth. He the *lyingest* rascal! You ask him the time of day he lie—he just natural born liar!"

She chuckled.

"Imaginative," I murmured.

"When he little fella his daddy wallop him when he tell a lie, but it ain't done no use. He lie just the same. He tell you he go to Bermuda—he probably go to Timbaktu. He just like that!"

I knew that now it was Feeba who was making conversation. There was a heavy pause.

"Mista Eric, he sure was a cute little fella," said Feeba, still reminiscing. "Yes'm. He sure was."

"You do miss him, don't you!"

There was that strange hesitation.

"Yes'm." The old negress gave me an unfathomable look "I sure miss that boy when he was gone."

My heart began to pound. In a moment I would dare ask another question.

"Just how long has he been gone, Feeba?"

She did not answer right away.

Then I heard the slight rustling sound, and slid automatically to my feet.

Miss Kathie, returned from her walk, stood in the doorway of the kitchen.

### VIII

**S**HE STOOD SO STILL. She was so slender and grey, and for a moment I did not know what it was that was strange about her—and then I saw that her eyes were closed because she was blind.

Before I could say anything Feeba said, "Miz Kathie, this here young lady, she am a friend of Mista Eric."

The quiet face turned in my direction and then smiled.

"How do you do, my dear?" she said. When I had told her my name she said, "It was kind of you to come to see us. I know that you are young because you have a lovely young voice; and I'm sure that you are also beautiful, because it seems that Eric's friends are always beautiful."

"She sure am pretty," Feeba told her, "with red hair!"

We went into the parlor, and it was remarkable how easily Miss Kathie moved, as if she had sight. She seemed to read my thought, for she said,

"I've been blind since I was a young girl, you see. One develops another sense to take the place of vision."

She smiled again, and I was thinking (and hoping that she could not read my thought) how incomplete the most gracious smile is without the eyes.

Miss Kathie was a woman of about fifty, tall and slim, and dignified in spite of the blue jeans and mannish white shirt (an immaculate shirt) which she wore. In her face I saw a family resemblance to Eric Conway. She had, too, his air of distinction.

"I'm Eric's aunt, you know," she said, "his mother's sister."

She had an odd, bewildered way of lifting her hand to touch her hair, which was soft and silvery and cut very short. The

whole effect, in spite of the costume which I was to learn later she always wore—was not at all masculine, but mild and remote and sexless. It seemed unfair to take any sort of advantage of her.

"Miss Calvert," I said, "I'm not actually a friend of your nephew. My husband and I met him only once."

I told her quickly about having sold the *Paquita* four years ago to Eric Conway and his friend, David Vinson. I told her that I was paying Mr. Vinson for the use of the *Paquita* and, although he seemed to have no sentiment about the yawl, he seemed to be unwilling to part with her.

"He told me that he can't sell the *Paquita* without Mr. Conway's permission, because he does not have legal title to her," I said.

She was listening raptly, with her head slightly raised. I had the uncomfortable feeling that I was talking business with one of Rossetti's angels.

"I know so little about it," she murmured, "but I shall try to find out. Amelia attends to everything. I'll ask Amelia. She will know."

"The yawl means so much to me," I said. "I can understand anyone's reluctance to part with that little boat!"

She shook her head.

"Amelia's only feeling about the *Paquita* is one of resentment. Of that I am sure. Because of it Eric went away—that, and David Vinson's persuasion."

Her hand strayed to her hair again vaguely. "I—I don't believe Eric ever really loved the sea. He liked to read about it. But he was afraid of the water ever since he was a small child. It was David's influence that made him go—and it was a great mistake."

"Yes."

I longed to tell her about my conviction that something had happened to Eric Conway, and about the bullet hole in the *Paquita*. But, somehow, this was not the moment for confidences. I wondered how much she knew, cut off as she was by darkness.

She seemed on the point of saying something, but now she lifted her head and listened as if to some distant sound that I could not hear.

"Amelia's car is coming up the road," she said, and turned her face towards me again. There was a strange pause, in some



way apprehensive. Then I could hear a car approaching along the dirt road. It drove up to the front of the house, and Feeba came waddling through the room from the kitchen.

"Dat her!" she said. "Dat Miz Amelia, back so soon!"

Through the window I could see a tremendous woman climbing out of an old yellow Mercedes touring car. She wore a black costume, and a flowered chiffon scarf tied about her head. There was something affected about her manner—about the way she stopped to inspect my pinto, Star, who whinnied and tossed his head.

"*Alors!*" she said, addressing Star in a deep and dramatic voice, "Where did you come from, you pretty thing?"

Then she turned, as if the stage directions had said to pause and turn—and walked into the house.

WHEN she came into the room I sensed her antagonism towards the blind woman. It was passive but of long endurance.

I saw now that Miss Amelia still resembled her portrait of twenty-five years ago. Between wattles of fat there was the same face, the same flat nose with flaring nostrils, the powerful chin, and the hair which still was red with the aid of art.

Miss Kathie introduced me quietly as an acquaintance of Eric's and the present tenant of the *Paquita*.

"Well, then, she must stay to tea!" said Miss Amelia, moving across the room with surprising grace for her size.

"It was kind of you to come, my dear," she said to me, "but how did you ever find us?"

She had paused before the pier glass to remove the scarf from her head and smooth her dyed red hair. She took this opportunity to glance at me sharply in the mirror.

I hesitated, trying to find an answer that would be truthful but evasive.

"I—I recognized the house," I said, "from Mr. Conway's description of it."

Miss Amelia turned from the mirror.

"What a pity he isn't here," she said. "I'm sure he would so enjoy seeing you again." Then she sighed gustily. "We miss him so!"

Again I had the feeling that something was wrong. It was the same feeling I had had when I spoke with Feeba about his absence. There was a false note somewhere.

"She doesn't miss him!" I thought. "She's stagey, but she's a poor actress!" I was also thinking that I would leave as soon as possible.

Miss Amelia poured the tea, and Feeba came in with the hot muffins. There was a rather heavy silence, and then Miss Amelia said,

"Aren't you afraid to be there all alone, my dear, on the *Paquita*?"

"Oh, no."

"You must be careful, you know. I have just heard about a dreadful thing. They were saying in town that a woman fell from the boardwalk—lost her footing—and drowned. Nobody missed her until the body was found. They don't even know who the poor creature was."

"It was I who found her," I said.

She turned towards me with the teapot poised in midair. "How dreadful for you!"

"She was identified today," I said. "She was a middle-aged woman named Eva Singleton."

Miss Kathie drew in her breath. "Amelia!" she said, "That was the name of—" But Miss Amelia interrupted her rudely, ignoring what she had said. She spoke to me.

"Tell us, Mrs. Ware, what do you do with yourself all day aboard the boat? I should be most frightfully bored, I know."

I took a scalding sip of tea. "It has been lonely," I said determinedly, "but I've spent the time reading. I've been reading 'The Witches Pool'."

There was a flat silence. Miss Amelia sat there with her tea cup poised.

"What is it?" asked Miss Kathie.

"It is a book, Kathie," Miss Amelia said, "a new best-seller. I haven't read it yet—but people are talking about it—a very sensational book that has just been published. Who wrote it, Mrs. Ware?"

"The author is anonymous," I said. "Some say it is a publicity stunt, a trick to inject that small element of mystery; but others say that he is afraid."

Miss Amelia put down her cup. "Afraid of what?"

"Well," I said, "it is a sort of psychological study of a woman with a power

complex—a very terrible woman, on a ranch long ago.”

“What did she do?”

“She caused a little boy to poison his father and his father’s fiancée.”

Miss Amelia turned her amber-colored eyes to look at me, and blinked several times slowly.

“How interesting!” she said, “Will you have more tea?” And then she smiled. I put down my cup and clasped my hands together in my lap. I was thinking to myself,

“Now I am sure of it! This woman is Delora!”

SOON after that I left. Miss Amelia walked with me to my horse. “My dear, I would urge you to come again to see us,” she said, “but I know you won’t be staying long aboard the boat.”

I turned my head and smiled at her deliberately.

“Oh, yes!” I murmured. “I plan to stay! I’m going to stay—indefinitely!”

“But you are so alone there!” She was almost motherly.

“Don’t be concerned for me,” I said, still smiling. “I have so many visitors. And everyone is so considerate. Someone came yesterday, while I was away, and left me a present—a cat!”

“How thoughtful!”

“Yes, I thought so, too!”

“Are you fond of cats, Mrs. Ware?”

“Well, yes. But this one, somehow, did not appeal to me. I didn’t keep it.”

“What a pity. I’m passionately fond of cats, myself.”

“Oh,” I said, “I wish I had known! I’d have been more than happy to give you this one!”

Somehow, our eyes met and slid away, and I knew now beyond the shadow of a doubt who had sent me the gruesome warning. I am not the most courageous of women, and suddenly I was terrified at the thought of what her second warning might be.

“Well, *au revoir* my dear,” she said. “It has been most interesting and delightful. And it is *au revoir* and not ‘goodbye’—for I feel very sure that we shall meet again, and soon!”

As I mounted Star I chanced to glance up towards the second story windows of

the ranchhouse, and it seemed to me that one of the front curtains had twitched, as if someone had brushed past it.

“It couldn’t have been Feeba,” I thought to myself, “because she is in the kitchen. And it couldn’t have been Miss Kathie, because she couldn’t have gone up the stairs as quickly as that.”

Then I remembered the ancient cat that had walked to greet me when I arrived. The cat could have done it, jumping upon the window sill; and, of course, there was nobody else in the house.

“Cats!” I thought to myself. “I shall be getting a phobia about them if this keeps up!”

I rode down to the stables and from there caught the boulevard bus back to Newport, where I bought a newspaper and read (with a certain tingling sensation in the spine) that the body of a woman found beneath the pier had been identified by her landlady as Mrs. Anthony Ware.

When I returned to the *Paquita* there was a communication from the deputy coroner asking me to appear at the undertaking establishment. There I identified the body as that of the woman who had sat next to me on the bus.

It left me shaken and further depressed. When I left I was served with a subpoena to appear at the second inquest—on the following morning.

Then, late in the afternoon, I had another visit from Mary Ellen aboard the *Paquita*.

She came slowly along the boardwalk in a tan gabardine slack suit and red sandals. I saw her before she saw me, and her face looked drawn and tense. She was smoking a cigarette which she tossed into the water when she came aboard.

“Hello,” she said. “Any news?”

“News?” I said. So she didn’t know!

“Yes, there’s news,” I said. “The woman is dead.”

## IX

SHE STOOD STARING AT ME, her lips slightly parted. “Dead! How do you know?”

I told her then about the inquest. She lit another cigarette with a trembling hand, and sat down on the deck rail.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Are you going to tell them about me—what I said?"

"I don't know," I told her frankly. "I don't know what to do!"

"She must have come down to look at the *Paquita* and lost her footing," Mary Ellen considered this for a moment. "But why should she have come here? I told her that I would meet her in the bar of the Burley Bell."

We were silent for a moment.

"It happened in broad daylight," she went on. "How tragic that nobody saw her fall!"

"Yes."

She looked at me. "It is too much of a coincidence," she said, "for them not to make a great deal out of it. There is more to the thing than you know."

I remember how young and lovely she was sitting there looking out over the harbor. The only thing wrong with the picture was her pallor under the marvelous tan, and the little nerve that had begun to throb in her jaw.

"I am frightened," she said.

"So am I. Why are you trying to carry it alone—whatever it is? Why don't you tell your husband all about it?"

I thought of the grey, worried figure walking along the boardwalk in the gloaming in search of Mary Ellen.

"He knows," she said. "He has known all along that it was Eva, and he didn't tell me! He went and looked at her in the morgue. He must have recognized her, but he said nothing about it—not to anyone."

"You are sure he recognized her?"

"Yes, of course. He kept silent to protect me. She was my nurse when I was small. Then, four years ago, she was my maid in Nevada. Allen has seen her many times. I cannot talk with him. He thinks me flighty."

"You have known your husband for a long while, haven't you, Mary Ellen?"

"Allen?" she said, smiling a little. "He was my mother's doctor when she died. That was twenty years ago. She died of typhoid fever. Allen was my guardian after that. He sent me to school in Switzerland. Then, much later, we were married."

"Goodness, I didn't know that he was a doctor."

"Oh, yes."

She sighed and stood up. I thought I knew what her next words would be. I expected her to implore me not to say anything about all this at the inquest. But instead she stood there looking steadily into my face. She seemed to assume that I would do nothing to betray her. There was an unspoken bond of friendship between us.

"Do you think your husband knows what became of Eric Conway?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"You were engaged to him four years ago when I met you."

"Yes."

There was a long pause.

"And then you broke the engagement and married Allen Brockman instead."

She smiled one-sidedly.

"Something like that," she said. She hesitated. "Except that we were not only engaged—we were married. And then I found out—his aunt warned me—that he regretted the marriage and was deserting me."

The hand holding the cigarette was steady again.

"So I came down here to the *Paquita* to talk to him. He was getting ready to sail without me."

"Oh."

"I was just as immature as he. The only difference was that I was angry and he was frightened. I flew into a rage, and I got the gun out of the desk drawer in the dining salon and fired it at him!"

"You shot him?" Suddenly I remembered my dream of the other night.

"No," she said. "I missed."

She smiled her one-sided smile. "The bullet went through a sack of flour in the cabinet, and into the partition."

"It is still there, Mary Ellen."

"Yes, I know. David left it there."

She sat down again.

"You might as well hear the rest of it," she said.

SITTING beside me on the deck in the late afternoon light, she told me the story. It began over twenty years ago.

"I don't remember my mother," she said. "When I was two months old she was widowed, and she came to visit Eric's family on a ranch in the hills near here. But while she was here she died of ty-

phoid. She is buried in the little graveyard on the hill."

"Lydia Combs Hawthorne," I said.

Mary Ellen turned her head and looked at me. "Yes," she said.

"In a beautiful white marble tomb," I said.

"Yes. Allen built it for her."

She was silent for a moment. "Inside it is beautiful, too, with light from a little jewel shining down. He keeps a key and goes there sometimes, still!"

"After my mother died, Allen became my guardian. Eva Singleton was my nurse until I was old enough to go to school. Then I went to Europe and stayed there until the war began. I came back and went to stay with Eric's people."

"Whose idea was that?"

"It was Allen's idea. I don't believe Aunt Amelia liked it, but there was nothing she could do—I simply arrived, bag and baggage. I had no way of knowing that she would dislike me."

Her smile came again, and played about the corners of her mouth.

"Then after I found out that she *did* dislike me, it really didn't matter to me, because, you see, I had fallen in love with Eric. I—I had no intention of leaving then."

She was looking out over the horizon, her face half-dreaming. I could picture her, fresh from school and meeting Eric Conway. He had grown up, handsome and neurotic and good for nothing. She had thought him fascinating.

"Eric had already romped through half a dozen love affairs when I met him. They always exploded at the altar steps; and then he would go into seclusion and write it out of his system in a novel—a very poor novel."

"Yes, I know," I said. I told her about trying to read "The Absent Husband."

Mary Ellen laughed mirthlessly.

"I don't recall that one," she said, "but they are all alike—if you have read one of them you have read them all. Trash! There was something the matter with Eric. He was emotionally haywire. He had been conditioned to despise whatever he loved."

She threw her cigarette overboard and it struck the water with a small, hissing sound. "But I didn't know," she said. "I was seventeen, and really ignorant—

with all sorts of romantic ideas. And I loved him very much."

I thought to myself, "You still do!"

"David Vinson tried to warn me," she said. "I don't know until this day whether he was concerned for my young innocence, or whether he was afraid that I would complicate Eric's life—but in any case he warned me. 'Eric will never marry you!' David said. 'He will break your heart and run away!'"

"David was sincerely fond of Eric in those days, I know," she continued. "He had a tremendous amount of respect for his talent, and he grieved because Eric was throwing it away. David has always been like that. He is fanatical on the subject of an artist and his work. He feels there is no crime greater than wasting genius, and I do not believe that the individual matters in his estimation. I think he would cheerfully have tossed me into the sea if it would help Eric write a good book."

"Yes, I suppose he would," I said.

"But David was mistaken! Because, after all, Eric married me. I paid no attention to warnings. We were secretly married the week before he bought the *Paquita*. Eric wanted it kept secret."

"Why?"

"He said he was afraid of Amelia. She would disapprove so bitterly. He wanted to keep it secret as long as I stayed at the ranch. We were going to run away. We were going to sail to Bermuda with David. I was not to tell Allen, either. I was to send him a note explaining everything after we sailed."

The darkness was beginning to fall now, but she seemed unaware of it. She shivered.

"I knew instinctively that we shouldn't run away," she said. "I was only seventeen, but I knew that Eric must learn to face whatever it was that frightened him. I knew that the decision to run away wasn't good. And, as it turned out, he began to put off the trip."

"He put it off from week to week for several weeks. David was restless, wanting to go. He put in the time doing a picture of me. It is the picture that is hanging on the wall in the studio. I posed for it in my mother's dress."

"Your mother's dress!"

"Yes."

IT HAD BEEN Amelia's idea about the dress. As Mary Ellen talked I could picture the rainy day on the ranch up in the hills, and David Vinson dropping in. Eric was away. Everyone was bored.

"Why don't you paint Mary Ellen's picture, David?" Kathie had said. Because the idea really appealed to him, David balked and wanted to be coaxed.

"I dislike painting pretty women," he had said sulkily.

"Well, that is interesting," Mary Ellen had retorted, "because I think your portraits are horrible—libelous! No matter what a woman wears you contrive to make her look somehow nude and very immoral. I think it is your mind, darling!"

"Women are the root of all evil," David said, lighting his pipe.

"Now don't quarrel, children," murmured Kathie.

"You wouldn't like the portrait I would do of you, Mary Ellen," David said. "You want something that is flattering, as pretty as possible—and like a damned poster—no character at all!"

Mary Ellen had laughed. "Oh, David!" she said, "I shudder to think what you see when you look at me!"

His eyes narrowed and held hers for a moment. "You'd be surprised!" he said. "I can see the future as well as the past when I look at your beautiful face!"

"I suppose you're thinking what a handsome skeleton I'll make!"

"Yes, my lovely. I might be thinking that, too."

Amelia had come into the room just then.

"I never think of Amelia that way," David said teasingly, "and some day I am going to paint her—when I find a canvas large enough."

"Well, really!" said Amelia archly. There always seemed to be an actual fondness between them which was difficult to understand.

"Some day when you have been pleasant to me for at least a week," Mary Ellen said, "I shall pose for you in a sweater."

But Amelia had taken up the subject, surprisingly.

"Why don't you paint Mary Ellen in one of her mother's dresses? There was one she loved especially. It was blue, very soft, with thousands of little pleats—per-

fectly exquisite. Blue chiffon. It must be in the trunk upstairs."

So they had gotten the dress out of the trunk. It was as sheer as a Botticelli drapery. Feeba had pressed the thousands of musty pleats. The portrait had taken half a dozen sittings, and Eric knew nothing about it.

Then, on the last day he had come into the studio and found them together, and there had been a horrible scene.

"I thought at first that he was jealous," Mary Ellen said softly, "but it wasn't that. It was the blue dress."

"The blue dress?"

"Yes. Afterwards we talked about it, and he said that blue had always had for him an unpleasant and unremembered association with the past. But, now that he had seen the dress, he knew that the association was tied up directly with that particular dress. He hated blue because the dress was blue."

"But why did he hate the dress?"

"He couldn't remember. He tried to, but he couldn't remember at all."

She sighed. "I thought about it a great deal," she said, "because there were other associations with things in his past that were unpleasant, too. All of them caused a violent reaction when he encountered them—and one of these things was water seen through clear glass."

"Just water?"

"Yes, just water! When he came into the studio that day David was pouring a drink of water from a carafe on the stand beside his easel." She stopped speaking for a moment and gave me one of her long, level looks. "You've read 'The Witches' Pool', haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, there is the answer. I know now, now that it is too late. Somehow, something must have happened to make Eric remember that incident out of the past; and so he wrote it into a book. Now that I've read the book I feel sure that when he was very small he put water from the pond into a drinking carafe and killed his own father and my mother."

She said it very quietly. Then there was a long silence.

"But at the time that he came into the studio and found me wearing my mother's dress—looking like her, too, you see—I

did not know anything about that. All I knew then was that he hated me. He would have killed me gladly, and I was his bride."

Her face had the look, at that moment, that David had caught in the portrait.

"I knew then that David had been right," she said. "I had made a terrible mistake. But that wasn't the end. We had one week of happiness left to us after that, Eric and I."

## X

"IF I HAD BEEN older and wiser," Mary Ellen said wistfully, "perhaps I could have helped him. He was half weakling and half genius; and even in my immaturity I knew that he was tormented by something hidden in his mind."

Tears welled up in her eyes. "As best I could," she said, "I tried to make him remember what it was."

There were the last few moments of spurious happiness they had had together. There was the one warm afternoon when they had lain stretched out in the sun, aboard the *Paquita*.

She remembered more clearly than any moments of passion they had had together, their conversation that afternoon.

The sun had been warm upon their backs. Mary Ellen could feel the little land breeze sifting her long hair. The deck dipped and heaved slowly with the ground swells from passing boats.

They had talked about the blue dress.

"I don't remember my mother," Mary Ellen said gently. "I would like to have known her—to remember at least what she looked like."

"I remember mine!" said Eric suddenly, and rolled over on his back and lay staring up at the blue sky. "They say that it isn't possible, I was so very young. But I do remember her—although only as a fragrance, a scent of mimosa which she always wore, and a softness."

Any moment now he would open his shy, mysterious mind to her, and she would know him completely. She felt closer to him now than she had felt in their deepest embraces, because she had never been able to forget, then, that it was a ritual he had gone through countless times be-

fore with countless others—a ritual which to him signified nothing. At this moment he was known, possessed.

She lowered her eyes, without moving her head and looked through her lashes along his side. Sunlight glinted upon his forearm, and irrelevantly she smiled to herself, thinking that she knew even the small, brown mole upon his thigh. She had forgotten for the moment that his mind was still a complete mystery to her.

"I remember the fragrance of her hair, too," Eric continued, staring up at the sky.

"What was it like?"

"Just like very nice hair—just like yours, doll!" he said.

"It's strange how vividly children remember—what they remember!"

"Yes, and especially how things smell. I remember bad smells, too." The corner of his mouth twisted down in an odd, cold smile. "I remember the faint, turgid odor that used to hang over the water of the little pond—up by the graveyard."

"It still does," she said softly.

Mary Ellen turned her head and looked at him, but he was staring up into the sky.

"Does it? I never go there. Can't endure the place!"

"Do you remember when your mother died, Eric?"

"No," he said. "I don't remember that at all. But I remember when my father died. I remember the terror of it!"

"I remember waking up in the night," he said, "and hearing Feeba down in the kitchen chanting, and I knew that my father was very sick. They had taken him to the back bedroom—and I remember walking through the house in my bare feet in the dark, looking for Kathie. She wasn't in her room, and her bed hadn't been slept in; and a terrible feeling of disaster and fear came over me. I felt that everyone had gone away and left me alone, and I was too frightened to scream."

Mary Ellen held her breath, watching him. She knew that he had never told her as much as this before, and might never again, and that a word, or even a sudden movement might end the mood forever.

"I remember going very quietly down the central hall, in the dark, with the watchdog walking behind me, his toenails click-

ing on the polished floor. He was a mastiff named Prince, and in the daytime he was familiar and friendly, but now I could not see him; and hearing him behind me was very terrifying."

He rolled over on his stomach again and lit a cigarette.

"I went to the back door. It was open, and I walked outside into the garden, and slammed the door behind me, shutting Prince in. There must have been moonlight, for I could see. I remember going towards a light which was burning in the window of the back bedroom. I went to the window but it was too high to look in, and I couldn't climb up. I could hear someone sobbing inside."

"Who was it, Eric?"

"I don't know. I can't remember. It was someone who had been visiting us at the time. I don't remember that part of it—only that this woman took care of my father until he died."

Eric had crouched, trembling, in the wet grass under the window until finally he had fallen into an exhausted sleep. His next memory had been of someone picking him up; and he had been enveloped in passionately possessive arms—soft arms that were somehow, nevertheless like steel.

"Who was it?" asked Mary Ellen.

"It was Amelia."

THERE was a pause. Mary Ellen and I sat looking out at the darkening horizon. I suppose we were both thinking of Amelia stealing out into the night to look in at the window—and what she must have seen: her dying brother, and the weeping woman who had been blotted out so completely from Eric's memory: Mary Ellen's mother.

"He had no memory of my mother's death at all," said Mary Ellen.

"I wonder who took care of her?" I said.

"I don't know. Feeba, I suppose. I've never wanted to ask Allen about it. He was so fond of my mother."

"Miss Kathie would know."

"I suppose so. She lives in a secret world of her own—but sometimes I think she knows more about everything that goes on than anyone else."

"I had that feeling, too, when I met her," I said.

"She knew, somehow, that Eric and I were married—before I told Amelia." She lapsed into a reminiscent silence.

"So you told Amelia, after all!" I said.

She nodded. Mary Ellen crossed her knees and lit another cigarette with a hurried, jerky motion that was unlike her and unbecoming.

"I felt guilty," she said, "and it seemed so ridiculous. I felt that it was sneaky and not nice to live under her roof and deceive her. Eric and I used to meet out-of-doors at night. There was a bird call he used to whistle outside my window: a series of soft, descending notes like the song of the little canyon wren. I remember once that Amelia noticed it and commented on it. And Kathie smiled to herself in her quiet way. She knew. She knew it was Eric."

A nerve in her jaw began to throb.

"And so, a few days after that afternoon when we lay upon the deck and talked, I decided to tell Amelia. Eric seemed to be very busy at that time. I hardly saw him at all. I spent a good deal of time in my room thinking. When I came into the parlor to tell her, she was there alone. She seemed almost to be expecting me."

I could picture it all as Mary Ellen told it: Amelia sitting there in the quaint and dusty room, her heavy-lidded, slow-blinking eyes fastened upon Mary Ellen's frightened little face.

Deliberately, Mary Ellen had sent up a smoke screen between herself and Amelia.

"She can't feel bereaved," she kept on telling herself, "because, after all, she isn't losing him. After the trip to Bermuda we will certainly come back here to live!" It had taken a lot of courage.

"Amelia," she said earnestly, "it is this: I have married Eric. He didn't want me to tell you. You see, being a man he doesn't understand how women feel about such things—and truly, it was no sort of a wedding to regret having missed. We were married by a Justice of the Peace." She began to laugh shakily. "And I wore my old brown linen dress; and Eric picked an orange blossom for my hair. It was all sudden and unplanned—and, well—I wanted to tell you?"

The cigarette smoke had cleared between them now. Amelia sat there staring at her,



her eyes almost hypnotic in their flat opaqueness.

It came to Mary Ellen in that moment that what had always seemed to be a well-controlled air of composure was, actually infinite self-approval. To the exclusion of everything else, Amelia admired herself utterly.

Amelia shifted her glance a little and began to shake her head slowly from side to side.

"No, my dear," she said in her low, rusty voice. "He could never be your husband, nor anyone else's! He belongs here—with me!"

Mary Ellen looked at her, shocked into silence for a moment by the self-righteousness of the woman's tone.

Then she stood up.

"I had hoped you'd be pleased," Mary Ellen said, and heard the thinness of her own voice. "I know how fond you must be of him—and how fond he is of you—"

"No," Amelia said softly. "No, my silly dear, I don't think you know—anything about him."

There was an awkward silence.

"He is like a child," Amelia said, and the corner of her mouth twitched in a smile. "You know that. You don't know at all, really, but he is a weak, naughty child!"

MARY ELLEN stared at her, seeing the short, dumpy body, the thick neck, the coarse hair brushed back from the square face—and yet from it all there emanated colossal power, rooted in self-love and as strong as Satan.

She ran her tongue nervously along her dry lips.

"That's—that's perfectly ridiculous," she said, stammering and knowing that she had begun to blush. "I know him very well, indeed, and he is my husband!"

Amelia went on as if she had not heard her.

"I've had to do this for him before, countless times. He loves to play with fire (not an adventurous child, you understand, just willful) and then all of a sudden he has caused a conflagration which is quite out of control, and he comes running to me in terror and I have to put it out. I'm sorry, Mary Ellen," she went on,

"dreadfully sorry! But he really is not yours!"

"You forget," Mary Ellen told her quietly, "that I am his wife!"

Amelia smiled slowly.

"How old are you?"

"I'm—I'm seventeen."

"Yes, I knew that. So did Eric. I fear that he was counting on it, the naughty boy! We will have it annulled. Your guardian, Dr. Brockman, will have it annulled when he hears of it, I'm sure!"

Mary Ellen turned and saw her own burning face and large, frightened eyes in the dusty pier glass. Then she turned back angrily.

"You are insane!" she told Amelia. "I have nothing more to say to you, because I do not think you are in your right mind!"

Her knees were weak, and she was trembling. She rushed out of the house and into the garden; Miss Kathie was waiting for her there.

"I know all about it," she said softly. "But I know something, also, that Amelia does not know: Go quickly to the boat! As quickly as you can! It is true that he's running away from you! He and David are planning to leave aboard the *Paquita* without you!"

Mary Ellen had stared at her blind face.

"You are lying," she said bitterly. "He had an errand in town. He's coming home any moment now. He told me to wait here!"

"No, my dear! It is true that he's running away from you! You mustn't let him go. He wants you but he is afraid—and so he's running away. Go down to the boat—quickly, Mary Ellen, before it is too late!"

Mary Ellen stood there in panic, looking about her. "The car is gone," she said hopelessly.

"Then take my horse! You can ride him down to the boulevard—he will come back by himself!"

Nobody ever rode Kathie's horse but Kathie. He was a patient animal named Claude—the creature I had seen in the shed. All of her life Kathie had ridden him. She had been blinded by a fall from a horse when she was eleven years old; since that time there had been a succession of horses that were trained to carry her about. Claude had his well-trodden trail

over the hills. He seemed to understand Kathie's need and his special responsibility.

So Mary Ellen, in her panic, had ridden him over the hill, hurrying him along and telling herself that it was ridiculous. A small inner voice, greater than all her pride, told her, however, that it was true.

She rode the horse down to Corona del Mar, and through the fields to the edge of the palisades, where it was possible to get a view of the *Paquita*.

At the turn in the path there was the spot where the trees broke away suddenly from the cliff and far below she could see the edge of the land. Held as in a cup there was the blue yacht harbor and the thin line of boats with their toothpick masts. She reined in her horse.

Sitting astride him she looked down along the water's margin to see the *Paquita* still riding at anchor. So it was still there!

"So you lied!" she said aloud to the absent Kathie. She dismounted and clung for a while to the trunk of a eucalyptus tree. Kathie's horse pawed the ground and nickered softly.

"Go on!" Mary Ellen said to him roughly. "Go on home, you!"

She leaned there against the tree; and the horse turned and trotted away in the direction from which he had come.

For a while she put her throbbing forehead against the sweet-smelling bark. Her eyes were straining towards the tiny boat; and now she saw that there was someone aboard—a dot moving upon the deck.

She could not see who it was. A great trembling had begun within her. She was afraid to watch any longer for fear the yawl would start to move, making the familiar turn into the channel, and head out to sea.

"Hurry!" she said aloud to herself, "Hurry!"

Then she began to climb the long way down, forgetful of her white flannel slacks. Her hair came loose and fell against her shoulders. Presently, with the terrible fear that he might this minute be leaving her she had left the path and started to slide along the profile of the hill, stumbling over loose rocks, and clinging to the branches of bushes as she went.

Then she was on the level beach, running.

A fisherman who sat in the shadow of

a wharf stopped eating an orange to watch her as she rushed past. She heard her heels clattering along the boardwalk and her breath loud in her chest.

## XI

WHEN SHE HAD COME aboard Eric was down in the galley. He had been putting some last minute supplies into the cabinet above the cook stove. He turned to face her, the cabinet door standing open behind his head.

"It is stocked full!" she remembered thinking. "He has known all along that he would go!"

He had known it last night, and David Vinson had known it, too. Everyone had known but herself. Even Kathie had known.

She saw the anguish in his face, how grey it was and old—twenty years older than his age at that moment. One of his fine hands went to his hair, smoothing it back nervously.

"Mary Ellen!" he said, using her name instead of the pet one, because all intimacy was past. "Why the devil did you come here?"

She leaned against the partition, her breath rasping, unable to say anything.

"You shouldn't have done this!" he said, the anguish in his voice. "You are making it worse for both of us. It is no use. You didn't have to come here, to confront me—just to torment me!"

"He's no good!" she thought, somewhere far off in the back of her mind. "He never was!"

He was trying to make himself angry, to put her in the wrong somehow, so that the incident could be closed.

"I hope it isn't your intention to make a scene," he said brutally. "There's really nothing to it, you know. We made a mistake. All right. We have had our fun and now it is over. Allen will take care of everything. He'll see that you get an annulment. So there isn't anything more to be said, is there?"

She stood there moistening her dry lips with her tongue.

"Who changed your mind for you?" she whispered softly.

Then when he did not answer, stunned comprehension came into her face.

"It was just one of your 'affairs'!" she said. "David has convinced you of that—telling you that you have to be free for your work! Trash! You've never written anything but drivel! I can't even read the stuff!"

His face contorted with rage. "Get out! Get out before I throw you out!"

"Do you mean that, Eric?"

"Get out!"

She rushed into the dining salon and wrenched open the drawer where the gun was kept. Then she came back, and bracing herself against the doorway to control the trembling of her arm, she fired at him.

He seemed to shrink into himself. But he had not been hit. The bullet had gone through a sack of flour and into the back wall, in the open cabinet. His face was white with flour, and clown-like. The flour was white on his heavy eyebrows, and on his hand now; for he sat down heavily upon the bench with his head in his hands.

If he had faced her, showing any will or spirit, or if he had made a lunge for the gun, she would have fired again. But everything had changed within her, and the impulse for revenge was gone.

For a long moment she stood there in the doorway looking at him blankly.

"Why did it have to be like this?" he said brokenly. "Why couldn't I go on? Dearest, I love you so—I need you so—I have never loved anyone else. But something stopped me—and now it is all over."

His hair stood up, spikelike and ridiculous and sprinkled with flour. She watched him for a moment with a remote sort of pity.

Mary Ellen remembered thinking, "Something has been done to him by someone long ago! He is broken and beyond mending!" For her love was not great enough. Under other circumstances she might have fought for him; but her strength was directed inward now to his child, and she had none left for him.

She turned slowly and went on up the steps into the bright light of day, the gun still dangling from her fingers.

MARY ELLEN was telling it all to me so calmly, as if it were something that she had read in a book, or something that had happened to someone else.

"You love him, don't you!" I said.

She smiled her strange smile. "Yes. All of the hate was gone when I fired the gun at him."

"I know."

"When I came out on deck," she said, "the sunlight was blindingly bright. I remember walking in a sort of daze, with the gulls wheeling and shrieking overhead. I went along the sand, under the wharves, for it was low tide, and I sat down in the shade where the fisherman had been eating his orange.

"There was nobody in sight. Even he had gone, and I sat there among the orange peelings with the gun in my lap. My head ached a little, but I did not feel unhappy. I didn't really feel anything. Pretty soon the gulls came down and began to fight over the orange peelings, shrieking at each other.

"I rolled over on my face, with my hand on the gun, and dozed for a while (I don't know how long) until I heard footsteps on the sand. Someone came and stood beside me."

She was trying so hard to remember it all, every detail, not so much in order to tell me, but as though she felt there was something missing from her memory—some bit of evidence that would give the clue to it all if she could recall it.

She remembered that she had lain there without moving while someone stood beside her, and presently Allen Brockman's voice had said, "Mary Ellen, what is the matter?"

When she did not reply he sat down beside her. She heard him get his pipe from his pocket and light it; and presently he took the gun from under her hand and looked at it.

"Did you fire this?" he asked her mildly.

Without speaking she nodded her head in the sand.

"Hit anyone?"

"No," she whispered.

He was evidently examining the gun. He said nothing. She heard the click as he snapped it together and then he must have put it into his pocket. She lay face downward there upon the sand without moving. She felt she would never wish to move again—that she would simply stay there forever.

Allen Brockman seemed to understand. He sat quietly at her side. Sometimes she heard footsteps in the distance, sounds of activities, and far-off voices.

The air had begun to cool a little. It must have been four o'clock when she heard the sound of the *Paquita's* auxiliary engines warming up. Her heart began to beat leadenly against the sand. When she finally lifted her head the *Paquita* was backing out into the channel. Dully she watched it turning, righting itself, and now—sweetly, beautiful as a white bird—it was skimming out to sea.

Allen Brockman took his pipe out of his mouth and hit the polished bowl against the sole of his shoe. Then he put it into his pocket, and slipping an arm under Mary Ellen's shoulder he lifted her to her feet.

"Come," he said, "I will take you home now."

AFTER THAT several weeks passed uneventfully. "I remember lying face down upon the bed in my room most of the time," she said. "Nothing that went on around me registered at all. Allen was having the marriage annulled. Pearl Harbor was attacked, and the country went to war, but I didn't notice."

Then, after a while, she began to realize that she could not stay at the ranch. When she became slowly aware of things, she felt the ominousness of the place. She had never told them that she expected a baby, but the news could not be kept from them indefinitely.

"Perhaps Kathie knew," she said. "Because Kathie always seemed to know everything. But I was afraid of Amelia. I thought that if she knew I was going to have Eric's child she would want possession of it—and I wondered if he would have any legal claim. I began to be frightened."

Then one day when she had been, thinking along these lines, the telephone had rung beside her bed. She rolled over and picked it up. The voice that came out of it had been Allen's.

"You are free now, Mary Ellen," he said. When she made no reply he said, "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I am all right."

There was a pause. He had never been one to make small talk. "Mary Ellen,"

he had said, "you had better marry me."

Mary Ellen looked at me with a vague, odd little smile.

"We were married at the ranch," she said, "and right after that Allen moved me out of the state to Nevada. He did not seem to want to leave me there with Amelia. He hired Eva Singleton to come and stay with me until Christopher was born."

"Was he there with you?"

She blushed suddenly again. "Oh, no," she said. "I'm not really his wife—that is—not a real wife. It was a legal measure to protect Christopher."

I felt sorry for the grey little man I had seen that night in the dining salon; and yet there was something about him—he did not seem to require anyone's pity. Mary Ellen must have read my thought.

"Allen isn't in love with me," she said, smiling. "Believe me—I wouldn't have married him—I would not have done such a thing if I had thought that he was. You see, he was in love with my mother!"

"Oh."

"I suppose it was some sort of satisfaction to him," she said gently, "trying to straighten things out for me."

"Where was he—what was he doing—while you were in Nevada?"

"He never told me much about it," she said. "He had retired in a way, given up his practice. He was doing some research work of his own—mostly in San Francisco—all through the war."

All at once she realized how late it was, how dark it had grown. "Good heavens!" she said, "I've been here for hours!" She made a quick apology and took her leave.

I watched her walk rapidly along the slip and turn landward at the boardwalk. Where the path was obscured by the bait shack a man stepped out of the shadows. He seemed to have been waiting there for her.

Their voices did not carry to me across the water, but I saw her make a startled little gesture of dismay and then walk to meet him. I saw in pantomime what it was he said to her:

"Mary Ellen, where the devil have you been? I was worried about you!"

Then they turned and walked away together. The man was her husband, Allen Brockman.

## XII

THAT EVENING I SAT DOWN at the desk in the dining salon and assembled all the facts I knew concerning the missing Eric Conway. I went about it in a seemingly logical manner, just as I thought Tony would have done.

When I had finished I came to only one conclusion, and that was based upon intuition rather than logic: I felt certain in my own mind that Eric Conway was dead.

And if he was dead I felt just as certain that he had been dead for a matter of four years.

The fact that he had presumably written the novel, "The Witches' Pool," and that it had been published anonymously during the past year did not in any way affect my conclusion.

"He wrote it to rid himself of the hate he had felt through the years for the woman who ruined his life and kept him under her domination," I told myself. "He never intended to publish the book at all—never knew that it was his one good and honest piece of work!"

Then, when he was dead, someone had found the manuscript and published it!

Who?

I didn't know! Perhaps it had been published because there was the probability of money. Or perhaps it had been published as a sort of denouement—to tell someone, Mary Ellen, perhaps—what had really happened.

But who would do that? Allen Brockman?

I didn't know.

There was another possibility. David Vinson might have found the manuscript and published it simply because it was so very good. With his zeal for accomplishment, he would have felt that it was too fine a piece of work to be lost. Such a motive would be completely in keeping with David Vinson's character as I understood it then. All this seemed more or less logical to me, although logic is not one of my strong points.

A loophole in the logic bothered me, however. I could not ignore it and it spoiled everything. The loophole in my logic had to do with timing:

Presumably, Eric Conway had been unaware of the true facts of his father's

death at the time that he had deserted Mary Ellen. According to my calculations he would not have had time to write a full-length novel—or any other sort of novel—during the interval that had elapsed between the incident of his desertion of Mary Ellen, and his death. Because there had been no interval.

I believed that he had died immediately. I believed that she shot him.

There was an alternative: the possibility that he and David Vinson had put to sea, and that the shock of his experience had caused his memory to clear (or was that just a device used by fiction writers?) so that he had written the book and then committed suicide. This theory was hardly worth considering at all. Even if I could believe in it, there was no apparent motive for concealing suicide.

Painstakingly, I thought over the story of the last meeting between Mary Ellen and Eric, as she has told it.

She had wandered from the boat in a dazed condition, with the gun in her hand. She could not recall how long she had been sitting under the wharf when Dr. Bröckman had appeared. And, of course, she did not know what he had done previous to his appearance there, and what had caused him to come in search of her.

He had taken the gun from her, and broken it, and unloaded it, and put it into his pocket. "Did you hit anyone?" he had asked, but without much curiosity. Evidently he already knew whether or not she had hit anyone. He may simply have wanted to know *whether she knew if she had hit someone!*

Obviously, he had already visited the scene of the shooting. I felt almost certain that he had been there. I felt sure that he had seen David Vinson while there, and that they had discussed what best to do. Dr. Brockman had watched, soon afterwards and without surprise, the departure of the *Paquita*. David Vinson was obviously aboard when the yawl left her anchorage.

And what of Eric Conway?

I BELIEVE that when the *Paquita* left harbor, and all during the interval that preceded her departure, Eric Conway had been dead—because without being aware

of it, Mary Ellen had killed him. The first shot had missed. But I believed very firmly that she had shot again, without remembering, and killed the man.

It would explain so many things.

It would explain why David Vinson picked up and left almost at once. I felt that he must have disposed of the body far out at sea. It would explain, too, why he did not have legal title to the yawl.

Also, it might explain Allen Brockman's chivalrous marriage to Mary Ellen. He had loved her mother, felt an obligation towards the girl—and he had felt that someday the disappearance of Eric Conway would be investigated. Perhaps he would be called as a witness. I recalled vaguely that there was some sort of legislation to the effect that a husband cannot be forced to testify against his wife.

"Or is it just the other way around?" I wondered.

At any rate, he had sent the girl out of the state—far out of reach of Amelia—and he had sent with her the nurse who had probably been present at her mother's death.

That brought me to the subject of Eva Singleton.

I did not believe, could not believe—whatever the inquest tomorrow might bring to light—that Eva Singleton had stubbed her toe and fallen into the ocean in broad daylight. I felt sure that she had been slugged or pushed. By whom? By someone she knew and trusted. The woman who had cheated me out of my room had been too wary a creature to have permitted herself to be lured to a lonely spot by a stranger and murdered in broad daylight.

THEN I thought back over the conversation I had overheard between Mary Ellen and her husband on the first evening aboard the *Paqueta*.

Allen Brockman had known what Eva Singleton looked like. And yet he had gone to the morgue and viewed her body—and said nothing. Why? He had told Mary Ellen of the incident, but had not revealed to her the identity of the victim. Why? The answer to this was rather obvious, it seemed to me: He had told Mary Ellen in order to study her reaction. He wanted to find out if she knew that the

body in the morgue was that of Eva Singleton.

"Perhaps he thought she killed Eva!" I thought.

Why was Eva murdered in the first place? She was murdered because she knew something; and because she required money to keep it secret.

What did she know? She may quite possibly have known the true circumstances of the death of Eric's father and Mary Ellen's mother. In that case, who would profit by her death? Only the person who was responsible for Eric's fatal action long ago.

And who would that be?

Amelia!

Here, too, there was a loophole in the logic. A woman answering Amelia's description—even to the floral scarf about her head—had stopped at Bessie Blew's house, in search of Eva Singleton at about the same time her drowned body was being fished out of the bay. It seemed unlikely that Amelia would deliberately show herself, automatically connecting herself with the case, had she known that Eva was dead.

But there was another piece of information that Eva Singleton had most certainly known, and for which she may have demanded money in return for silence. It was this: She must have known that Christopher was Eric's child.

In this case, who would profit by her death? Who, by her own admission, had been in terror lest Amelia discover that Christopher was Eric's child?

Mary Ellen!

It was Mary Ellen who had said, quite frankly, that she supposed Eva wanted money. It was Mary Ellen who had talked with Eva over the telephone, arranging a meeting.

Suddenly there came to my mind the portrait that Vinson had painted of her, with the look of terrible, ineffable wisdom in her eyes.

"I can look into your beautiful face," he had told her, "and read not only the past, but also the future!" That had been before the disappearance of Eric; long before the death of Eva.

A chill wind seemed to blow suddenly through the cabin, swinging the lantern, and causing me to shudder.



"I will not believe that!" I said aloud, resolutely, to myself. But there were other things that required an explanation.

There was the matter of Mary Ellen's presence in town. She and her husband—who had never lived together—were staying with David Vinson. How did they happen to be there? Was it because of the clipping that told of the rumored presence of the author of "The Witches' Pool"? Did they arrive together, or did Allen Brockman follow his wife there? Did she turn up at David Vinson's house uninvited? And did he send for the husband?

Later, I was to learn that this was exactly what had happened. But at the time it seemed extremely unlikely.

I THOUGHT again about the relationship which seemed to exist between Mary Ellen and David Vinson. It was an odd relationship. There had never been, to all appearances, any love lost between them.

But they had had one thing in common—their devotion to Eric. If there had been an armed truce between the young girl and the cynical and talented older man, still there had been this bond between them. And if Mary Ellen, in a fit of frustrated passion, had fired at Eric and killed him, I felt that it would have been completely in character for David Vinson to have "covered" her crime. He had a cold nature, apparently, but not a small one.

By the same token, if Mary Ellen had read somewhere that the author of "The Witches' Pool" had come home—it would have been to David Vinson's house that she would have gone, in the absence of other accommodations, while she searched for Eric.

David Vinson might well have done everything within his power to prevent the marriage and—to break it up once it had been accomplished—if he felt it would interfere with Eric's career. But with Eric dead, it would be characteristic of cool, impersonal David Vinson to do what he could for Mary Ellen. He would try to persuade her to leave before she probed too deeply and discovered the truth.

But it would be an embarrassing truth, too, as far as David Vinson was concerned.

For it seemed more than probable that he had published "The Witches' Pool." The novel had sold approximately one million copies to date, which would have reimbursed him, at about forty cents a copy, to the tune of four hundred thousand dollars. The movie rights, split with the publishers, had gone for one hundred thousand dollars, plus the incidental velvet that goes to the author of any best seller. And what had he done with this money? The Department of Internal Revenue had doubtless relieved him of the lion's share—but there would be a goodly sum left which did not rightfully belong to him.

"It would be out of character," I thought, "for him to have published it for profit!" I wondered what he could have done with the money—assuming, of course, that David Vinson had published the novel as his own.

There did not seem to be any other reason why rumor would have it that the author of "The Witches' Pool" had returned. According to Pop Seely he had been in town about two weeks.

I wondered what Allen Brockman thought of it all, and how much he knew. Did he, too, believe that David Vinson had published the novel?

The relationship that existed between Brockman and Vinson was also an unknown quantity as far as I was concerned. I presumed that their mutual knowledge of Mary Ellen's crime, if such a crime had ever taken place, was their sole bond. Perhaps they shared, also, the knowledge of the facts surrounding the publication of the novel.

But all this was so completely speculative. It called for a more audacious and a more analytical mind than mine. It called for Tony! "I wish Tony were here!" I thought dismally.

From one of the pigeon-holes of the desk I dragged forth the clipping which Mary Ellen had left in the cabin on that first night. I looked at it again. It had been torn out of a newspaper. I found my copy of the local paper which I had bought in Newport, and compared the type; but it was not the same. There was nothing of an identifying nature on the face of the clipping—it was simply an item from a gossip column—perhaps a syndicated



column which was reproduced the country over.

This was not an important point, but it showed how wrong I could be: I would not have had to look much farther to discover the truth about the clipping. I already knew that it had appeared in last Sunday's paper. Had I compared the type with that of the Laguna Beach tabloid, I would have found the type was identical. I would have found the item in a local gossip column that had appeared on Sunday. By telephoning the editor I would have discovered, without any trouble at all, that David Vinson had sent in the item and urged that it be published.

But I did not do any of these things. "Not that it matters," I thought, "not that it would make things any clearer to know where Mary Ellen was last Sunday!"

I was tired. I was depressed. I was very sleepy. I was also up to my neck in this thing, and I had no idea what to do. The inquest would take place tomorrow. They would ask questions. I would swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. But I really didn't know the truth. Whatever I could say might be very misleading—worse than silence!

It was then about ten-thirty.

What prompted my next action I do not know, unless it was the feeling of uneasiness and insecurity that seemed to haunt me. Before me on the little desk in the dining salon were the notations that I had scrawled during the evening. I gathered them up into an untidy pile, and carried them up the companionway.

Out on the chilly deck I found a spot leeward of the wheelhouse, and there I tore the papers into bits, and scattered them painstakingly upon the water. They fluttered down into the blackness like great snowflakes, sometimes catching the light from the street lamps on the boardwalk.

Then I went below, fastening down the hatch and locking up for the night with a sigh of relief. But down in the cabin my feeling of uneasiness returned. I went on forward through the passage, through the dining salon, and into my stateroom.

For a matter of fifteen minutes I puttered about, brushing my hair a hundred strokes, buffing my fingernails. Then it

seemed to me that out of the corner of my eye I had seen something move in the dining salon beyond.

I remember that I turned with reluctance, not wanting to see whatever I would see there. My hands had become very cold in my lap, and my knees felt strange.

There was someone standing quietly there in the shadow.

Amelia.

### XIII

SHE WAS SMILING FAINTLY. "Did I frighten you?" she said.

I remember forcing myself to stand up and walk towards her. There was nothing in my mind at all but sheer terror. It was a combination of surprise and my instinctive fear of the woman, which was so great that I knew I must do something—anything—or be paralyzed by it.

"The hatch was locked!" I thought.

She could have come aboard while I was out on deck. I preferred not to believe in magic. She had come in quietly while I was in the stateroom, and she must certainly have a key.

"You came to see me," she said, "so now, you see, I have come to see you. Sit down, my dear."

Her heavy-lidded eyes blinked at me slowly. In the half-darkness they were black. I remember once having seen a baby gopher hypnotized by a kingsnake in my grandmother's garden. The snake had lifted its head, swaying from side to side, and the little gopher had stretched its head out, too, in fascinated imitation. I could feel the chords in my neck straining.

"I have been thinking it over," she said quietly, "and I want you to come along with me, back to the ranch tonight."

I made a terrific effort. "I—I'm sorry," I said, "I really don't believe I can go tonight."

She ignored my words. "You will need just a coat," she murmured. "Come, now. It really isn't safe for you alone here. All these dreadful things happening—poor Eva Singleton murdered! I have decided that you are to come with me!"

I wrenched my eyes from hers. The clipping about the author of "The Witches' Pool" still lay upon the open desk. It

seemed to loom there, larger than life, and I felt sure she must see it.

"So you think she was murdered!" I said softly.

"My dear, we can talk about that later. It is a long drive. Get your coat!"

I remember thinking that if anything were going to happen to me it could just as well happen here as anywhere—that if she wanted me to go with her perhaps it was the thing to do. I sat there without moving, gripping the arm of the chair.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I can't go with you tonight."

There was a pause, and then she sighed. Suddenly she was no longer persuasive. I felt curiously exhausted.

"You are a very foolish girl—foolish and stubborn," she said. "We will talk here, then. At first—when David told me about you—that you had come here and rented the *Paquita*—I thought that you had come to spy upon us for some reason—goodness knows why—but now I know that you are not a meddling—not any kind of one. You merely want your boat back."

"Yes," I said. "That was it—at first."

"Well, you shall have it back—tonight!"

The news did not enchant me, somehow. I sat staring at the carpeting.

"You don't seem to be very happy about it, my dear!"

I took a deep breath. "I suppose there is something you want me to do," I said.

"Yes, my dear, it is very simple. I want you to say as little as possible on the witness stand tomorrow. Our connections with Eva Singleton have been unfortunate. She was a person of unsavory character—a servant in the house at a time when we were having family difficulties—and she had taken advantage of these circumstances to make occasional financial demands—"

"Blackmail," I murmured.

"Well, not as strong as that—but requests that we did not feel we could refuse."

I suppose I smiled faintly. "And if I were to get the *Paquita* on the terms you are offering, wouldn't I be a rather unsavory character myself, Miss Conway?"

"But of course not, my dear. This is quite a different matter. You would be doing us the favor of sparing us an embarrassment, and for that we would like to reciprocate. We live quietly in the hills.

We would like to avoid unpleasant publicity. That is a natural desire, isn't it?"

I don't believe I replied at all.

HER EYES roamed to the clipping on the desk. "If anything were to be said which would focus attention upon us—you see, my dear—it would lead to what you already know: identification of the ranch as the setting for a best seller. We have lived there for many, many years. There'd be no privacy, ever again!" For the moment she was very convincing and human. "People would come poking around—looking at everything that is ours—staring at the graves of our dead—asking a great many personal and impertinent questions—"

"If that were all—" I murmured.

"That is all, my dear!"

"I can't help thinking," I said, "that the death of Eva Singleton should be investigated."

She lowered her eyes. "You sat next to her on the bus, didn't you?"

"Yes. Yes, I did."

"What did she say to you?"

"She didn't say anything that would be of interest to you—nothing much at all," I said. "She did not say that she knew you, either, but I think that you called to see her at Mrs. Blew's house—on the evening of the drowning—and so it is reasonable to suppose that she had gotten in touch with you."

She smiled faintly, and I thought how much more pleasant she looked when she smiled. "Poor Eva tried to get in touch with me," she said, "but I was not at home. She left a message, and her address. Feeba told me about it when I returned; and I went to Mrs. Blew's house to see her."

"Yes, I know."

"But, you see, Eva had telephoned from there, and so the call was traced."

"Do you mean that the police traced the call to the ranch?"

"Yes," she said. "It was a toll call, and so there was a record of it. Feeba has just received a summons to appear tomorrow at the coroner's inquest!"

I stared at her.

"I've been worried," she said, "because for someone with no curiosity you seem—to—to—have learned a great deal about

us. My request is a simple one that you say no more about our personal affairs than is necessary. We are a secretive family, and tragedy has made us more so."

Her remark seemed like a reproach.

"I've never wished to embarrass anyone," I faltered.

"Of course not, my dear! And it won't be necessary for you to say anything about us at all!"

I said nothing. She stood up. "Mr. Vinson's number has been traced, also, and he will be at the inquest. He will give whatever evidence is necessary."

"I see."

"Unfortunately," she added, as an afterthought, "poor Eva was heard to ask for 'Eric'. We want nothing to happen that would cause his name to be brought into this. It mustn't be known that he is at the ranch."

I stood up, too, and now I grabbed the back of the chair.

"Eric!" I said. "I—I thought—"

"You thought he was away? Not now, my dear. Eric has come back to stay with us, where he belongs!"

I thought I was going to faint, and sat down quickly. "Do you mean that he is at the ranch now?"

"My dear, you're not to tell anyone, but he is there! And we can settle the matter about the *Paquita* tonight!" She smiled slyly. "Now, run along and get your coat! We'll leave at once. It is just a short drive."

She should not have smiled. It was what broke the spell. My hands were suddenly cold again.

"Oh," I said, "Oh, I see!"

I FELT her eyes upon my face, forcing me to look at her. I remember looking unwillingly into her eyes and thinking how like a great, unblinking toad she was.

"What sort of nonsense is this?" she said.

"I'm not going," I said.

"So you don't intend to be sensible about this?" She seemed tremendously powerful.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm not going. Please go home now! Please go!"

"You want your yawl, don't you? You'll never get it back if you don't come with me now. Eric—"

"I don't believe you!" I whispered. "I

don't believe he is there at all! And I am afraid of you! Please go!"

"You little fool!"

"Believe me, I simply want to be alone—to get some sleep, and have a chance to think! I'm perfectly safe here!"

She was still smiling. "My dear, I haven't the slightest interest in your safety, but to me you are potentially dangerous. If you go to the inquest tomorrow and babble everything you know—all of my plans—everything will be ruined for me! And I do not care to take that risk!"

"How can you stop me? What can you do?"

"I can stop you very easily, my dear."

I know that my voice sounded small and frightened. "They'll come looking for me!" I said softly. "I've been summoned, and if I'm not there they'll look for me!"

She stopped smiling. "It would have been so much simpler, my dear," she said quietly, "if you had been sensible. Such a little fool! Fencing with windmills! Well, I shall think of something. Something to keep you quiet—"

Her hand, which I thought of as soft and fat, closed upon my wrist like a vise. Very calmly she bent my arm behind me. I felt nauseated and faint. It was no use.

"What are you going to?" I said weakly.

"I don't know," she said in the same mild voice. "I haven't decided. But I shall stay here tonight. I shall see that you do not leave this place!"

#### XIV

IT WAS DARK in the stateroom when I awoke. For a moment I did not know where I was, and then I realized that I must have dropped off to sleep, and that I had slept quite a while.

The illuminated dial of my wrist watch showed twenty minutes past one. I had not intended to sleep at all.

I sat up in bed and listened. There was no other sound but the lapping of water, and the small wheezing noises that a boat makes in a gentle tide.

Amelia was either sleeping very quietly in the next stateroom, or else she was awake, for I could not hear her breathing. I sat up in bed listening for some time, and trying to think what best to do. She had shut me into the master stateroom in the

stern of the boat. I had a painful bruise on my arm which had been a partial means of persuasion, and now the key to my door was doubtless in the bosom of her corset.

With my ear to the panel I had heard her enter the smaller stateroom portside. I had also listened to the awesome sounds of Amelia retiring for the night, and then the squeaky groans of the mattress as she tucked herself in. Now all was still.

And I was frightened.

She could not keep me here indefinitely. And if my presence here were to become an embarrassment to her, I did not know what means she would take to escape from that embarrassment.

My mind darted about rather aimlessly, trying to formulate any sort of plan. I tried to recall some previous occasions upon which someone had been locked in this particular stateroom, and what means had been used to escape—but I could recall no helpful incidents. The *Paquita* was rather notorious for its lack of locks and their general inadequacy. There was the padlock on the hatch which could be picked with a hairpin. None of the other staterooms had locks worth mentioning, and people always had to sing in the shower.

But the lock on the door of the stateroom in which I now found myself was exceptionally fine. It was a relic of the days when Tony and I had chartered the *Paquita* to boating parties, and the double stateroom had been affectionately termed the "bridal suite". There had always been two keys to the door. One was kept in the lock on the outside, and the spare had always been kept on the shelf in the clothes closet.

Suddenly my heart skipped a beat.

"The spare!" I thought to myself, and was afraid for an instant that I had spoken aloud.

I thought that she must surely have heard the tiny complaining sound of the bed as I swung my feet over the side. Then I was creeping to the closet door. The door creaked slightly as it opened, and I died again. But the key was there, dusty and cool and beautiful to the touch.

By the time I had reached the stateroom door I had formulated a plan. It was simple and direct, and not very good. My intention was to get through the passage to my own stateroom in the bow of the boat, to dress, to go ashore and find

Amelia's car—and to drive up to the ranch.

I wasted the next few minutes with my ear pressed against the partition of her stateroom, listening and trying to think. I could hear nothing, and my thinking was not very good, either.

"If Eric Conway is really alive," I thought to myself, "if he is there at the ranch, I shall talk to him before the inquest!" But if Amelia had been lying, and he was not there—well, I had no further plan at the moment.

There was still no sound from Amelia's room, and this was disturbing. If she were lying awake (I knew too well the acoustics of the boat) I would never be able to get past her door. In fact, I knew from experience that a shoe dropped in the master stateroom sounds a little like a depth charge in the adjoining lounge. At the other end of the boat, for some unexplained reason, it is quite the reverse and interior sounds have a tendency to be muted.

If I could get safely through the passage and forward into my own stateroom in the bow, there would be the insulating effect of all the partitions between. I knew that once in my own stateroom I could dress—except for my shoes, and somehow get on up the companionway, and ashore.

Fifteen minutes went by and still no sound. Then ten more. Now it was a quarter of two, and I dared not wait any longer. I crept to the door and opened it, and stood listening.

Still no sound.

THE DOOR of her stateroom stood open, and as I slid by I saw the mound of blankets over her great bulk.

Her pocketbook lay upon the desk in the dining salon, and I scooped it up and took it along as I went by. A minute later I was in my own stateroom, extracting from her purse (and shamelessly, too) the keys to her car. The key to the hatch of the *Paquita* was there, also, and I took that.

Then I was getting into my grey suit with speed and a strange, unexplained feeling of detachment and calm. I even stopped to straighten the seams of my nylons and to put my best doeskin gloves into my handbag.

Out on deck it was a magical night,

cold and clear as a February night can be. I walked in a leisurely manner along the boardwalk. There was no light nor any sign of life in Pop Seely's shack as I passed by. I walked out to the street and there I met my first temporary setback. Amelia's big yellow Mercedes was not at the curb. It was nowhere in sight.

"Well," I remember thinking to myself, "there's no mistaking it, and she couldn't hide it—and that's something!" I decided to walk around until I found it.

At the first corner a cruising police car went by. I think it slowed down when the occupants sighted me, and out of the corner of my eye I saw the two heads turn, giving me an interested once-over, but I trudged along.

I found the big and ancient vehicle at the third corner, and slid in behind the wheel with a prayerful sigh.

It started with a purr. It started as if it had been waiting there all evening just for me. Together we hurtled off into the night.

It was almost a quarter of three when I approached the Conway ranch, but as I drove up through the valley I saw from far off that the kitchen windows at the rear of the house were lighted.

Perhaps I should have explained that the second story did not extend the full length of the building, but must have comprised one or two bedrooms under the slanting roof, and probably some attic space.

I followed the curving road. When I drove up to the front of the house I saw that the second story windows—the windows of the room where I had seen a curtain move, were also lighted. Someone looked out for an instant, and then disappeared.

I left the car in the shed, beside the stall where Kathie's horse was having a midnight snack. The sound of the big creature crunching oats in the darkness was pleasant and reassuring.

The thin moon had set. Now that the car's headlights were out it was uncomfortably dark everywhere except for the spots of light upon the ground where the windows cast squarish patches of brightness.

For a few minutes I stood irresolutely at the side of the house looking up at the

stars, and smelling the narcissus blooms that were dimly white along the footpath. No one seemed to stir in the house.

I knew what they thought. They had heard the car, and they thought that Amelia had returned. Finally I walked around the house to the back, as I had done on my previous visit. But this time I looked in at the kitchen window.

The window was open, and I could see Feeba sitting there in an old flowered wrapper. She was rocking disconsolately, and talking to herself. On the kitchen table beside her there was a cup of coffee and a half-eaten piece of corn bread.

For a moment I considered tapping on the window to attract her attention, but then I thought it would frighten her. I decided to open the door and walk in.

Feeba stopped rocking and looked at me. Her old face was astonished, and then troubled. "Miz Echo, that you?" she said without enthusiasm. "This ain't no place for you, honey. We got plenty trouble. You shouldn't never have come!" Suddenly she stopped, and her face became cautious. "Where Miz Amelia?" she demanded.

"She's down at the boat, Feeba," I said, truthfully. "She's sleeping aboard the *Paquita* tonight."

"Why for she do that?"

"I don't know, Feeba. It was an idea she had. I didn't think much of it, myself."

Feeba made no comment. She commenced to rock. "Ah got plenty trouble, honey," she said. "They done told me come to court tomorrow, tell all ah know. Yes'm!"

"Well, you do that! It's just a coroner's inquest. They won't try to scare you. They just want to find out what they can about Eva Singleton."

"Yes'm." Her tone was very glum.

"It isn't really a court, Feeba."

"Miz Amelia tell me keep my big mouth shut!" she said. "What ah going do?"

"Tell them the truth!"

She was silent for a moment, rocking. "Ah ain't messing with Miz Amelia," she stated finally. "Anybody do that with Miz Amelia get in *real* trouble!"

"I can believe that," I said wholeheartedly.

She stopped rocking again and looked at me shrewdly. "Why she send you here, honey?"

"Well, Feeba, she didn't exactly send me here. But she told me Mr. Conway was here. She said I could talk to him!"

I saw right away that she did not believe me. I suppose I was quite a problem to Feeba. She had the innate politeness of the southern negro, and she would never have dreamed of telling me off in as many words. But Feeba had her own methods. She looked at me for a minute.

"My land!" she said, chuckling. "Miz Amelia she sure wander in her mind sometimes, don't she! My land, just imagine her saying a thing like that!"

And at that particular moment the hall door opened abruptly, and Eric Conway stood in the doorway.

## XV

HE WAS WEARING a dressing robe, and his hair was ruffled. But he looked very much alive. He squinted against the light.

"Feeba, what the devil are you doing up at this hour?" he said in his gentle voice. Then he saw me, and a startled look was followed by one of pleased recognition.

I sat there staring at him, and a great happiness welled up within me. So he was alive, after all! I don't know why I had such a warm feeling for Eric Conway. It was not just that I had seen him through Mary Ellen's eyes. I had liked him at first meeting, for no larger reason than the timbre of his voice, and the fact that he had sensed my regret about losing the *Paquita*, and had been tactful in his casual way.

His face was gentle and sensitive, and there was certainly nothing in it to indicate the havoc he had caused in several lives, and the hearts he had broken. Except that it was, after all, an exceptionally handsome face, and he was an exceptionally handsome man.

He looked years older than he had at first meeting. But he also looked more poised. His grey, wide-set eyes were sadder.

"Echo Ware!" he said. "What are you doing here?"

I took a deep breath and held out my

hand to him. He clasped it warmly. "I came to see you," I said.

Eric tightened the sash on his robe and sat down on one of the kitchen chairs.

"Many's the time I have thought of you!" he said, smiling in a pleased and reminiscent way. "If I'd known you were in town—you and Tony—I would have made quite an effort to look you up."

"Tony isn't home yet," I said.

"Oh, I see. Still overseas?"

"Yes."

He paused and thought, looking into my face. I had an odd impression about him. He was not quite alert at the moment, not exactly as if he had been asleep, but rather as if he had been deeply engrossed in some work that had taken his entire attention.

We were still at that stage in our unexpected conversation which is equivalent to the first round in a boxing match—circling around and trying to get the drift of the situation. So I said, rather irrelevantly, "You seem to have been writing."

He ran his nice hand through his hair. "Yes. I keep all kinds of hours. Sometimes I work all night and sleep practically all day. Feeba, here, keeps me fed."

"Another novel?"

"Well," he laughed. "A different kind of novel—but still a novel."

"I liked 'The Witches' Pool,'" I said. "It is very moving, very sincere!"

He looked at me blankly. It was a genuine blankness.

"'The Witches' Pool?'" he murmured. "I haven't read it."

I stared at him, searching his face. But it was true. He wasn't feigning ignorance. Obviously, he hadn't heard of it.

"You see," he said, smiling apologetically, "I—I've been really a recluse since I left the hospital. I've been up in the Oregon woods writing like a working fool."

"Oh," I said. I wondered about the "hospital" he had mentioned.

"Then David Vinson—you remember him—came back from Bermuda a couple of weeks ago. He wrote me that he thought I had better come back for a visit. I've been away since shortly after I last saw you."

His manner was a curious and charming mixture of simplicity and sophistication, and now he was very earnest, as if it were



important that I understand everything.

"The town has changed a lot," I murmured. "All of the old faces have gone."

"Yes, so they say. I haven't gone into town yet. Haven't seen anyone except Vinson. He's been here several times."

"You've had other visitors," I said, "but you've been difficult to reach—very scarce, in fact. I was worried about you. You seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth!"

He caught at the first remark. "Who?"

I wanted to tell him about Mary Ellen, but I held my tongue. "Well," I said, "I, for one, came to see you. But they told me you weren't here."

FEEBA spoke up. "Miz Amelia, she tell us—Miz Kathie and me—she tear us limb from limb—that's what she done say—if we let on you here!" She got heavily to her feet. "You all going talk all night, ah going get me some sleep!" she said, and waddled from the room.

Eric was smiling a troubled smile. "Where did you say you are staying?" he asked.

"I thought you knew. I've rented the *Paquita*."

"No," he said, "I didn't know that." For just an instant an indescribably lost look came into his face.

I thought, "There's something wrong with him. He spoke of a hospital. They have been shielding him because he isn't well!"

The look was gone as quickly as it had come. I stood up to leave. "I've borrowed Miss Amelia's car without her permission," I said. "It is high time that I brought it back to her."

But he put his hand out in a restraining gesture. "Don't go!" he said. "I want to talk to you. You see, I didn't know anything about the *Paquita* because Vinson had had her all this while in Bermuda. Something happened just before I sailed, and I thought that I would never come back here—but here I am. We reached Bermuda just when War was declared, and I came right back and enlisted in the Army."

I sat down again, too astonished to speak.

"You didn't know that?" he said.

"No, I didn't know that. What did you do?"

"In the Army? Oh, for almost a year and a half I was the little man who picked up cigarette butts in half a dozen camps on the West Coast. I have a real talent for it."

"Now I have heard everything!"

"Oh, no, you haven't! Then in April of forty-three I (and a few thousand others) landed at Holtz Bay on the island of Attu, in a dense fog. Then in May I landed at the receiving hospital at Seattle, still in a fog."

"Wounded," I said.

"No, just fog! I was a psycho-neurotic with 'immersion feet'!"

"How long were you there, Eric?"

"In the hospital? They shipped me to the big one in San Francisco and I was there almost a year and a half, Echo. The immersion feet got well in two months, but the fog didn't clear for a much longer time. Then, eventually, I could see more clearly than I had ever been able to see before." The look that I liked came into his face. "For the first time since I was very young, I am completely out of the fog."

We smiled at each other.

"You see," he said, "they do wonderful and terrible things with drugs, with hypnosis, and other methods—and finally (if one is lucky, and I was lucky) the deep and mysterious subconscious mind gives up its dead for decent burial."

"Yes, I know."

"When everything was clear, and I could look back at all the twisted wreckage of my life, I took a train to Oregon and went into the woods and wrote it all out of my system."

My heart was beating excitedly.

"In a novel?" I prompted.

"I suppose it could be called a novel, although it was not something for publication. But it was a human document, and a good job of dredging in very muddy waters."

"What did you do with it?"

"What could I do with it? When it was finished I wrapped it up and sent it—the only copy I had—to our family doctor. He had been personally interested in the case, and had come to see me once in the hospital."

"Well?"

"Well, what?"



"What did he do with it?"

"Oh, I don't know. Kept it, I suppose. I told him to dispose of it in any manner he wished. To him it was an interesting case history."

"Did you ask him to publish it, Eric?"

"Publish it? Hell, no! But it would never have entered his head. It was far too personal. I would never have permitted it to be published!"

"I see."

There was a pause.

"His name wouldn't be Allen Brockman, would it?" I said.

"Yes!"

I said, "Look, Eric, I'm going to lend you a novel I've been reading. It will interest you. But don't let anyone know that you are reading it. That would be very dangerous, I think."

His nice head turned slowly and he looked at me. "Who wrote it?"

"You did!" I said. "It is a best seller called 'The Witches' Pool'."

He shook his head gravely. "Never heard of it."

"I couldn't be mistaken, Eric."

"I never wrote anything by that title. The story I wrote had no title. Where did you get the idea it was mine?"

"It is all so vivid. When I came to the ranch I recognized the setting—anyone would—everything is the same: the same old split tree, the stream, the pond beside the graveyard—everything. Anyone would recognize it."

"Tell me about it," he said.

SO I told him about it at considerable length. When I finished he sighed. "Yes, that is it," he said. "I never had any acknowledgment of the manuscript. I thought it strange. But I trusted the man."

"Do you think he published it?"

"Dr. Brockman? He wouldn't do a thing like that! I've known him all my life!"

"I know."

"Somebody else must have taken it," he said. He did not seem to be angry, only puzzled. He thought for a moment. "Does Amelia know about the book?" he asked.

"Yes, she knows. But don't let her know that you know!"

He sighed again. "You see," he said,

"you see, the thing is that the woman in the book, Delora—she was fictitious. She wasn't real at all—not taken from life. The rest was true, but Delora was a product of my own conscience."

"What do you mean?"

"I can recall all the details of my father's death, now, and the death of the woman he was to marry. It has all come back within the past three years with a sort of nightmare clarity." There was an odd smile on his face.

"But there was no Delora, really," he said. "She was merely a wishful invention on my part; the result of a desire to escape remorse—and to punish Amelia. I wanted Amelia to be Delora, because I feared and hated her."

He was still smiling. "I wasn't supposed to go near the pool," he said. "I remember being told that there were no fish in the water because it was magical water and had caused all the fish to vanish—and that I would also vanish if I disobeyed and played there—and, especially, that I would vanish if I drank the water."

"I see."

"Up to that time the water had been chlorinated," he went on. "I can remember the faint chemical smell hanging in the air when the wind was right. But Amelia objected so strenuously. She said it made her ill. So the chlorination was discontinued. That was when I was told to keep away from the pool."

"You mean," I said, "that it was your own idea entirely—to give the water to the unwelcome guest so that she would vanish?"

"Yes, Echo, that is exactly what I mean."

"You were so little. You didn't know it meant death. It was simply some sort of convenient magic that would remove the lady from the scene."

"Yes, exactly."

"How tragic!"

"Now that the floodgates of memory have opened, everything is coming back to me. During the past few days I have looked at some of the things in an old trunk upstairs: a blue dress that I hated and feared. I can remember now, for the first time, that my father walked with a woman wearing the blue dress, on a summer evening in the garden—"

He told me about overhearing the conversation between his father and Mary Ellen's mother. He remembered sitting among the tall, fragrant amaryllis stalks beside the path, and watching those two walk by. The woman was wearing the blue pleated dress that he hated. It billowed and floated about her.

She had told the man that he must break away from all his memories of the past. They would take Eric and live somewhere far away when they were married. It was the only way to find new happiness together.

"Amelia and Kathie might stay here," the woman had said. "Or the ranch could be sold. Amelia could travel as she has always wanted to do. Kathie could live for a while in a home. We could let Feeba go. Eva is really all the help we should need."

The little boy listened among the great pink amaryllis flowers trembled with terror. His father had always seemed to him a remote and magnificent creature, the most wonderful person in the world, but the ranch was a symbol of security. Amelia and Kathie meant permanence and comfort. Feeba was the source of all good things.

When the man who was his father, and the woman in the blue dress had wandered past, he had gotten to his feet, trampling and crashing among the tall brittle stalks of amaryllis. He ran, sobbing, to his source of certain sympathy.

He ran straight to Feeba.

## XVI

"I TOLD FEEBA all about it," Eric said. "That's all I remember. Then there is a hazy interval, and I remember getting water from the pool, every day, and putting it into the glass decanter beside the bed in the guest room. I remember that the maid caught me in the act of doing it!"

"Eva Singleton?"

"Yes." He turned his head to look out of the dark window. "It is coming back to me very slowly," he said. "I'm not sure, some of the details are not distinct yet. But that is the true story."

"Does Dr. Brockman know it?"

"Yes, yes, he does. That is what makes

it impossible to believe that he published the book. He would have known it to be part fact, and part fiction."

"And he certainly knew," I said, "that you wrote it as a sort of emotional catharsis—and not for publication. That is—if he saw the manuscript at all!"

"Yes."

Outside the night was very black. A little land wind came up and rattled the windowpanes. I wondered how many ghosts whispered out there in the dark garden, and what they would have to say if we could hear them.

"He was my father's doctor when he died!" Eric said suddenly. "I've known him all my life. He is a man of honor."

"Yes," I said softly, "I know!" And then I could not resist saying, "Is—is he married?"

"Yes. He was an old bachelor, but he has married recently. I think he has a young child, a son."

My heart had begun to pound again. "Have you met his wife?" I persisted. Eric was obviously not interested in this trend of the conversation.

"No," he said, "I haven't. I haven't any idea who she is. Our associations have been strictly professional in the recent past, and not social at all."

"Then you don't know where he is now?"

"Brockman? No, I haven't the faintest idea where he is now."

"Where did you send the manuscript, when you sent it to him?"

"I had lost track of him," he said, "after I was discharged from the Army. He wrote me a couple of times but I was finishing the book and I didn't answer. And so I sent it to his old address in Nevada."

Suddenly I wondered what Eva Singleton had known about this, and what her connection with the case had been. For I knew there had been a connection somewhere. Whatever it was, she had told someone, and someone had killed her.

I stood up to go. "Eric," I said, "perhaps I shouldn't tell you this—I don't know—but Dr. Brockman is here in town!"

"What makes you think so?"

"I've seen him. And I'm sure—as you say—that he is a man of honor! I believe someone intercepted the manuscript. I do not believe that he ever received it! Per-

haps a servant stole it—" I hurried on. "And Eric, be careful! Don't trust anyone—not anyone at all!"

"Oh, don't worry about me!" he said lightly.

I had a terrible moment of misgivings. "Perhaps I have said too much!" I thought. "Or else I haven't said enough!" I wondered whether I should have told him of the death of Eva Singleton. I wondered whether I should have told him about the inquest tomorrow—no, it was today! My watch showed five minutes of four!

ERIC walked with me out to the car, and I was thankful for his presence. I had again the feeling that the dark garden was haunted by unseen things, prying and listening. The heavy fragrance of narcissus from the pathway was somehow funereal.

For a moment we hesitated, standing there, looking toward the old house. Then a window was raised, and Kathie's pale face looked out, drugged with sleep.

"What is it?" she called to us softly. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing, Kathie!" Eric told her. She leaned there, turned towards him mutely, as if she, too, could hear the ghostly whisperings all about us. "Something has happened to Amelia!" she whispered.

"No, Kathie! Nothing is wrong! Go back to bed!"

I got into the car. They seemed so vulnerable, the two of them. "Remember what I said!" I told Eric. He stood there in his robe and pajamas, with the wind ruffling his hair.

"You are the one who must be careful, Echo!" he said.

I wondered whether I should have told him about Mary Ellen and the child—his child—and that Brockman could be reached at Vinson's house.

I knew that I had blundered ridiculously in thinking Eric dead. Yet in my blundering I had touched upon something ominous, something carefully concealed and unexplained. In the absence of more heroic assistance I must do what I could, and use my own inexperienced judgment. There was no one to turn to, either for advice or help. I was entirely alone.

"Good-night, Eric," I said.

As I drove down the curving road I

could still dimly see him standing there, tall and thin, against the dark house.

I drove along in a state of indecision. With an icy coldness in the pit of my stomach I thought of going back to the *Paquita*, and Amelia waiting there. I had no intention of returning before the inquest.

Amelia had implied that I was a sort of female Don Quixote fencing with windmills, but I knew this was not so, and that she knew it. She knew as well as I that I had stumbled upon a scene of mortal combat. The issue at stake I did not know, but I knew that she was my deadly enemy.

The question of what to do until day-break troubled me. There was an all-night cafe located in an oasis of blazing light at the Coast Highway junction. I stopped there, and seated at the greasy counter, drank two cups of coffee and did some more addle-pated thinking.

The main subject for thought was the scene I had had with Amelia. I tried to remember back over the whole thing: I recalled very well how it had ended—but my memory of the beginning had been slightly clouded by panic.

I remembered that Amelia had appeared with a key. It was unlikely that she had owned a key to the *Paquita*. It was much more likely that she had borrowed it for the occasion. And from whom? From David Vinson.

She had mentioned having talked with David Vinson. He had been summoned to the inquest, too. They had discussed it together: what best to do. They had probably discussed what Feeba would be instructed to say. And they had probably decided that I was a problem to be dealt with. As I thought about it now, my trust in David Vinson was considerably shaken, for the moment at least.

"He gave her the key!" I thought. "I wonder why?"

When she had appeared in the dining salon she had not expected opposition from me. She had known of my secret conviction that Eric was dead. She had tried to frighten me away with a grisly warning. When that method failed she had decided to bribe me. And assuming that all people are opportunists she had approached me as an acquaintance who requests a pleasant favor with every inten-

tion of reciprocating. In exchange for being agreeable I was to have the *Paquita*.

I wondered where she would have taken me, had I gone with her. I doubted that she would have taken me to the ranch at all.

Obviously, Eric had not been told of Eva Singleton's death, nor of the inquest. I doubted that Amelia had had any intention of telling him about these things tonight.

I wondered just what would have happened to me.

THE SUN rises so late in February. I dawdled over my two cups of coffee as long as possible. Then, reluctant to leave the brightly lighted restaurant, I ordered scrambled eggs and fried potatoes, and pushed the greasy mess around and around my platter for another twenty minutes.

At six o'clock I paid my check and departed.

Along the horizon far out at sea the sky was brightening softly. In another hour there would be daylight.

I drove slowly past the outskirts of sleeping Corona del Mar and on along the highway to Newport.

When I left the car in its original parking place, the sky overhead had turned pink, and birds were beginning to twitter in the tops of the palm trees along the curbing.

The matter of returning the car key to Amelia presented a problem. Returning daylight restored a little of my courage, but I had no intention of confronting her in person aboard the *Paquita*. Even the thought of meeting her by chance on the boardwalk was almost paralyzing.

Finally, I decided to entrust the errand to Pop Seely. I sat down upon the running board of the car and wrote him a note explaining that Miss Conway could be found aboard the *Paquita*, and this was her car key. Then I wrapped the note and the key in a dollar bill, and started off along the boardwalk.

Lights were burning in the windows of some of the shacks along the way, but Pop Seely's place was dark. When I knocked on the door his dog, Skipper, barked at me in a perfunctory sort of way from within, and then I heard him lie down

upon the floor. Pop Seely was an early riser, and obviously he was not at home. His car was not in its accustomed parking place, either.

I pushed the key through the wide crack under the door, and then took to my heels up the street to Mrs. Blew's house as if the devil were after me.

Mrs. Blew lived in a little frame cottage with a "dressmaking" sign on the window, a row of abalone shells along the garden walk, and a front yard full of sand and wildly blooming petunias and geraniums.

There were lights in the windows, and when I knocked on the door Mrs. Blew appeared promptly with a coffee cup in one hand. She was wearing a hairnet and a red candlewick bathrobe, and she beamed at me with the frank relief of a middle-aged woman who has a lot of things to say and nobody to tell them to.

"Hello, Mrs. Blew," I said, "I hope you will excuse the earliness of the call."

"Gracious sakes!" she said. "I'm glad to see you, dearie! Come in! Come in!" We went into the kitchen, and she put the gas on under the coffee pot.

"I suppose you are going to the inquest again," she said, with a sigh.

"Yes, I have to go," I said. "I've been summoned."

"I have, too! Isn't it awful! You poor child, you do look a bit worn out!"

"Yes."

"Such a dreadful thing. I know how you feel. That woman's dead face haunts me."

We sat down at the kitchen table, and I had still another cup of coffee; I told her about my meeting with Eva Singleton on the bus that day, and how she had taken the only cab and arrived first.

Mrs. Blew clucked regretfully. "I don't know why you didn't come and tell me," she said. "I'd have sent her packing in spite of the O.P.A.—God rest her poor soul!"

Then she brightened. "Would you like to see the room?" she said. "It's a real nice room, dearie. I've been giving it a good, thorough airing. The man spent hours looking through her stuff—that one little suitcase—and I just can't stand cigarette smoke. I think he must have smoked a dozen cigarettes. He must have been awfully nervous!"

"What man?"

"Well, I don't know who he was. Such a fine looking young fellow. He said he was a friend and that she might have left a message. So I let him in."

"Oh!"

She stopped and looked at me suddenly. "Goodness, do you suppose he was all right?" she said.

"I don't know!"

"He was such a handsome fellow," she said rather illogically. "I didn't thing anything about it. Likely something to do with the inquest today."

SHE LED the way into the "spare bedroom", and I stood just inside the doorway of the room which was to have been mine. The windows were wide open, and the curtains flapped in the damp, early morning air.

This was a typical beach cottage bedroom with its white enameled bedstead, a chest of drawers of unpainted pine, a Maxfield Parish print, a photograph of a cherub with crimped hair and a bow and arrow.

"The reporter from the newspaper was here, too," she said, "and a man from the Police Department. They came yesterday. They went through her things. She hadn't even unpacked her suitcase, you know. And here's her hat."

I looked absently at the sensible brown felt that I had seen last upon the head of the living Eva Singleton. "Did they find anything?" I asked.

She turned and gave me a frustrated look. "I don't know," she said. "I really don't know! I asked them but they wouldn't tell me! What do you think of that!"

"I think you've had a lot of bother and trouble, and that it is a shame!" I said sincerely.

We went back to the kitchen. Mrs. Blew poured herself another cup of coffee. "You know, it was the queerest thing," she said thoughtfully, "about those telephone calls. I'm such a scatterbrain. It just never occurred to me at the inquest. But afterwards Mr. Vinson who lives in Laguna was talking to me—and he asked me if I remembered either of the telephone numbers that she called." She paused to put down her cup.

"Well, I didn't," she said. "I told him

so. But after I got home I got to thinking that she had a slip of paper in her hand—and, you know, last night, in the middle of the night, I got up and looked in the trash basket beside the telephone table—and I found it! The same slip of paper. It had something written on it—she'd crumpled it up and thrown it away."

"What did it say?"

"Well, it had a Laguna Beach telephone number and the name 'Vinson'. And then under it was written: '4:00 P.M. Boardwalk at foot of palisades.' After that it said, '5:30 Burley Bell'."

"Vinson!"

"Yes," said Mrs. Blew. "I think it is awfully queer."

I was thinking that Mary Ellen had said she arranged to meet Eva at five-thirty at the Burley Bell. But it would seem that Eva had had a previous engagement—at four o'clock, on the boardwalk at the foot of the palisades. And from this earlier rendezvous she had never returned.

"What was the telephone number?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Honey, I don't remember," she said, "but I phoned the deputy coroner about it—such a nice man—and do you know he came right over and got the piece of paper!"

"I don't doubt it."

Mrs. Blew got up from the table and stacked the cups and saucers in the sink. "Why don't you come and live here, dearie?" she said suddenly, "instead of on that horrid boat?"

I thought of the dismal room that I had just seen, with the sagging mattress and the worn linoleum upon the floor, the windows that looked out upon a high, unpainted fence. But it meant safety! It meant not being alone any more!

Relief and gratitude filled my heart. "Oh, thank you, Mrs. Blew!" I cried. "That is kind of you! Yes, I'll come!"

## XVII

LATER IN THE MORNING Mrs. Blew and I went to the second inquest together. The room which had been comfortably filled on the previous occasion was packed now. Almost everyone was there.

Somewhere near the front of the room I saw David Vinson. Beside him sat a red-haired man who looked familiar. I knew that I had seen him somewhere before. Then suddenly I remembered where: He was the bus driver.

Pop Seely was there, too, looking clean and neat, but older and more haggard than I had ever seen him look before, and he seemed to avoid me. Try as I might I could not catch his eye.

In the last row sat Feeba. Her big black face gleamed with nervous perspiration and was glummer than ever.

But I did not see Amelia. I wondered where she was. She was certainly not at the inquest.

I sat with my hands pressed tightly together in my lap while the identifying witness was called. There was a slight disturbance in the back of the room, and Feeba came forward.

She testified that she had viewed the remains and recognized the deceased person to be, to her certain knowledge, Eva Singleton. Then Feeba testified that she had received a telephone call from Eva Singleton on the day of her death.

"She didn't want nothing from me!" said Feeba, her eyes rolling. "She want to inquire about some folks used to stay with us long time ago. I tell her I don't rightly know where they is."

"Did you arrange to meet the deceased person?"

"Miz Eva? No suh, not me! I say, 'you all come out see me sometime, Miz Eva!', but she know I don't mean it—I just being polite!"

There was a ripple of laughter among the spectators. I looked at Feeba and wondered if there were any truth in what she said. But she was very convincing. She was a splendid witness.

"Do you know anyone by the name of 'Eric'?" the deputy coroner asked.

I had a sudden falling-elevator feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Yes suh!" said Feeba. "Miz Eva she ask about Mista Eric. His name Conway. He a little fella when she know him, and he been away in the Army long while. She say, 'You all give my regards to Mista Eric'. That's what she say!"

While she was speaking Mary Ellen must have come in very quietly with Chris-

topher. They were not present when the inquest began, but they were seated in the end seats of the last row when Feeba finished testifying and went back to her place.

No sign of recognition passed between them, but I saw Feeba stare at the child. I wondered whether Feeba had known of Mary Ellen's early marriage, and whether she had ever seen Christopher before.

I was mulling over these matters when it dawned upon me that my own name was being called. I took the stand and related the details of finding the body.

"Did you recognize the deceased person as the same woman who sat next to you on the bus?" inquired the deputy coroner.

"No, I did not. It was getting dark and besides she was floating on her face—down there in the water."

"The deceased person was, however, the woman who had taken your room?"

"Yes. She was."

"Did you see her after that—after she had obtained your lodgings?"

"No. I did not—not alive."

"That is all."

There were other witnesses. Mrs. Blew repeated the story which she had told at the previous inquest, and there were several questions pertaining to the telephone calls which had been made from her house.

"All I know," she said nervously, rolling her wadded handkerchief between the palms of her hands, "is that she put in two telephone calls—and each time she talked to a woman."

She stopped, as if struck by a new thought, and then added,

"She may have put in more than two calls—I never thought of that! And then later—well, in the middle of the night, after that first inquest, I got to thinking about the slip of paper she had held in her hand while she was telephoning. So I got up and looked in the trash basket, and there it was. It is the one I gave you, sir."

THE deputy coroner dismissed Mrs. Blew. David Vinson was the next witness. The crumpled slip of paper was passed to him and he examined it.

"Is that your telephone number?" the deputy coroner inquired.

"Yes, it is."



"Can you explain why it was in the deceased person's possession, and why there is a record of a telephone call having been made to that number on the afternoon of February ninth?"

"No, sir, I cannot. I should like to explain, however, that I am a portrait painter, and my residence is a studio. I keep open house at all hours—and in a very casual way the telephone is answered by the guest nearest it when it rings."

"I see."

"I should like to mention," continued Vinson, "that by a curious coincidence Mrs. Anthony Ware, who was at first mistakenly identified as the deceased person, rented my yawl on the tenth of February."

The deputy coroner looked baffled. "Does that fact have some bearing on the case?" he asked.

Vinson passed his hand thoughtfully over his face. "I'm not sure, sir," he said. "I was merely pointing out that it is possible the deceased person was trying to get in touch with Mrs. Ware with whom she was acquainted, rather than with me whom she had never met. The place where she met her death is not far from the yacht anchorage."

The deputy coroner looked at him blankly, and then at me. "Your business arrangement with Mrs. Ware took place on the day following the deceased person's death, did it not?"

Again David Vinson passed his hand slowly over his face, and then deliberately he looked over at me and smiled—a humorless, unamused smile. "Yes, sir, that is right," he said.

The deputy coroner looked slightly annoyed. "If you have further information to give," he said. "It is your duty to do so."

"No, sir, that is all," said Vinson.

My heart had begun to pound noisily against my ribs. I thought, "He knows! He knows that I spent that first night aboard the *Paquita*! And now he is warning me—holding it over my head!"

"Then I fail to see the connection," said the deputy coroner dryly.

I sat there feeling like something in a trap. Someone had seen me that night. I hoped that it had not been Pop Seely. I would prefer that Vinson, himself, had

seen me. It would hurt to have to believe that Pop Seely had told him.

Vinson was dismissed and the bus driver was called. He came up to the witness chair, good-natured and smiling. When he sat down he looked over at me, and for a horrible moment I thought he was going to wink.

HE testified that his name was Ed Hickson and that he'd driven the Coast Route for the past eighteen months. He had driven the bus in which the late Miss Eva Singleton had arrived in town.

"She sat in the front seat with Mrs. Ware, here, and groused about the housing situation," he said. "I remember Miss Singleton said she was here to look up some folks she used to know."

My heart was beating so loudly now that I felt sure everyone in the room must hear it.

"Did you hear all of the conversation between the two women?"

"Yes, sir. I got pretty good ears."

"Did you gather the impression that they intended to continue the acquaintance?"

The bus driver shook his head. "No, sir! Just the opposite! When she found out what that dame done, Mrs. Ware was mad enough to kill her!"

He stopped in sudden horror of what he had said. Then he grinned. "I didn't mean that literally!" he said. "I just mean that the little lady has got red hair, and she was mad clean through, and I didn't blame her at all!"

The coroner looked thoughtful. "Did Mrs. Ware make verbal threats against the deceased person in your hearing?"

His freckled face turned very red. "Well, not to mean anything by it, sir! She didn't mean what she said!" He mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. "But she said, 'I could kill her!'"

There was a little murmur, soft as a breeze, among the spectators.

When Hickson was dismissed Mrs. Blew patted my hand. "I never heard such nonsense!" she whispered.

The deputy coroner nodded to someone in the back of the room, and now Mary Ellen came forward wearing a Kelly green coat over her grey slacks, as if she had strolled in from the boardwalk.



SHE was sworn in, and then she moistened her lips with her little pink tongue, and sent me a scared look.

The deputy coroner asked her name and address. She said that she resided in Nevada, and that she was at present a house guest in the home of Mr. David Vinson.

There was a curious atmosphere of tension in the air. I remember that she seemed afraid even to look at Vinson. I had a feeling that she had been present at the conference between Amelia and Vinson, and that her present action was in flagrant violation of instructions.

"What is your connection with this case?" asked the deputy coroner.

She moistened her lips again. "The deceased person, Eva Singleton, was my nurse," she said in a low voice, "when I was a little girl."

"And you have been in communication with her?"

"Yes. She telephoned me at Mr. Vinson's house. He did not know this. It was on the afternoon of February fifth."

She did not seem to know how to go on. The deputy coroner prompted her gently. "Have you kept in touch with the deceased party through the years?"

"Yes, in a way."

"When had you last seen her?"

"About—about two years ago, in Nevada."

"Did she come to Newport on your invitation?"

"Oh, no! I didn't know Eva was coming. I didn't know she was here until she telephoned me at Mr. Vinson's house."

"Did she ask to see you?"

"Yes, she did. She wanted to see my little boy, too. She was very fond of him. You see, she took care of him when he was very small."

"And did you arrange a meeting on February fifth with the deceased person?"

"Yes, we arranged a meeting. But she never appeared. I—I had no idea why. I thought perhaps she had misunderstood."

"Where did you plan to meet?"

"At five-thirty at the Burley Bell. That may seem strange—to have planned to meet her somewhere else—but you see, my host is a busy man, and I did not think it would be convenient to ask her to come to the studio."

"Did the deceased person mention, during the course of the telephone conversation, that she had an earlier appointment with someone else?"

Mary Ellen thought for a moment. "No," she said slowly, "not that I recall. I had suggested first that we meet at four o'clock, but she changed it to five-thirty."

"I see."

There was a pause. The deputy coroner leaned towards her. "Do you know someone by the name of 'Eric'?" he asked.

I saw the tears spring to her eyes as if she had been struck. She looked at him stolidly for a moment.

"Yes," said Mary Ellen. "I have known someone by the name of Eric—but not recently—not to know anything about him any more!"

That was the end of the testimony. In the slight confusion that followed, Mary Ellen must have slipped out of the room with her child, as quietly as she had come in, for when the jury filed out I looked back and only Feeba was sitting there in the last row.

The jury deliberated for a long while. They returned at last with a verdict of accidental death by drowning.

## XVIII

OUTSIDE THE CROWDED DOORWAY I looked about for Pop Seely, but he was not in sight. Instead, I found myself face to face with the bus driver. He had been waiting for me, and his face was flushed.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello, gorgeous," he said, with an anguished groan. "Next time I open my great big mouth I hope something strikes me dead!"

"Forget it," I told him. "It really didn't matter. And besides, the case is closed, isn't it?"

"Is it?" he said.

I looked around in a dazed sort of way for Mrs. Blew from whom I had gotten separated in the crowd. The sunlight seemed unnecessarily bright, and all I really wanted was an aspirin and a deep, dark hole to crawl into. I am not one of those Amazons who can miss a night's sleep and come up smiling after a cold shower. I felt terrible.

Even worse than the lack of sleep was the emotional letdown. All of a sudden here we all were out in the bright sunlight. What had appeared to be murder was "accidental drowning", and the man who had been thought dead was alive.

But it did not ring true. There was a very false note somewhere in all this sudden sweetness and light. It was not even grudgingly acceptable, like the phony ending of a Class B movie.

The bus driver was standing there, looking at me. "It won't wash!" he blurted.

"I know. I was thinking the same thing!"

Now I could see Mrs. Blew plowing toward us through the dispersing crowd.

"Take care of yourself, gorgeous!" the bus driver said to me.

"I shall."

"You better be very careful! Somebody don't like you!"

"Who?"

"This Vinson bird. You better not trust him!"

"Never fear," I said. "I shan't!"

Still he stood there. "If you should need anything—any help—"

Mrs. Blew came up to me then and took my arm. "All this girl needs is some sleep!" she told him tartly, "and I'm going to see that she gets it!"

When we left he was still standing there with a worried look on his face.

On the way back to the cottage in Mrs. Blew's rattle-trap coupe we drove past the parking space where I had left Amelia's car. The car was gone.

"Well," I said to myself, satisfied, "that settles it. Pop Seely must have given her the key."

We drove on to the cottage, and with comparative peace of mind I crawled into my lumpy bed and slept. I slept soundly, waking up only once when the door bell rang loudly, and there were voices in another part of the house.

I vaguely remember hearing the continual flapping of the ragged window shades in my room, and whenever I turned over in my sleep the mattress squeaked. Somewhere an alarm clock ticked noisily. But these were all friendly sounds heard through a heaven-sent sleep that was deep and dreamless.

Hours passed.

Then it was three o'clock and something

awakened me rudely. It was a peculiar, restricted feeling in the region of my diaphragm. I suppose that my eyes flew open. I found myself looking into the solemn face of Christopher.

He was eating a piece of bread and butter, clad only in his little undershirt, and he was sitting on my stomach.

"Hi," he said, and smiled charmingly. It was Eric's smile, all right.

"Hello, Christopher," I said. "What on earth are you doing here?"

Christopher took a large bite of bread and butter, chewed it slowly, and then swallowed before answering.

"The man hit the lady," he stated.

"What man, darling?"

"The big fat lady. He pushed her."

"Oh!" I didn't move a muscle. "Tell Echo about it, darling," I said gently.

Christopher reached down and patted my face with his buttery little hand. "You may have the rest of my bread and butter," he said very politely. "I am all through now."

Then he scrambled down from the bed and became instantly, by one of those miracles of childhood, a locomotive.

"Choo - choo - choo - choo - choo!" he screamed, racing around the room as fast as he could go.

A DOOR opened somewhere and I could hear Mrs. Blew hurrying towards us along the hall. I jumped out of bed and cornered him.

"Christopher, baby," I pleaded, "tell Echo quickly! Where did you see the man hit the lady?"

He began to jump up and down with a great abundance of energy.

"In the window!" he shouted, "in the window!"

Mrs. Blew came charging into the room. "Oh, you bad boy!" she scolded, "coming in here and waking up Echo! Why can't you play quietly like your mamma said?" She looked at me anxiously. "Did you have a good sleep, dearie? You were so tired that it worried me!"

"I'm fine, Mrs. Blew." I sat on the edge of the bed. "Where is Christopher's mother?"

"I don't know, dearie. She came to see you. She said she figured out that you might be here. But I told her you were

sleeping and I wouldn't wake you; you were too tired. So she left Christopher with me. She said she had no place to leave him—and I don't mind a bit."

"But where did she go, Mrs. Blew?"

"Well, she went away in a big old foreign car."

"Oh!" I said. "Oh! Was she alone?"

"Well, I really didn't notice. Christopher began to cry, so I took him right into the kitchen and gave him a marshmallow." She smiled happily. "He's been awfully good—takes to people right away. He had his nap, and ate an egg and some apple-sauce for lunch."

"Good heavens!" I said, "how long has he been here?"

"Why, practically ever since you went to sleep, lambie." She thought for a moment. "I forgot to ask her when she'd be back. She seemed to be preoccupied, as if she had something important on her mind."

I sat on the edge of the bed trying to conceal my fears. I was thinking that a "big old foreign car" would surely be Amelia's. The thought of Mary Ellen going for a long drive with Amelia made me almost ill.

"If you want to use my telephone to call anyone," said Mrs. Blew, "you are more than welcome to it!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Blew!"

I got up shakily and went out into the hall and dialed Pop Seely's number.

"Pop," I said, "this is Echo Ware."

There was a slight hesitation at the other end of the line which I couldn't analyze. "I been looking for you!" said Pop. "Where you been?"

"Well, Pop, I'm staying with—with a friend. What I want to know is—did Miss Amelia get her car all right?"

There was another odd hesitation. "Nope," he said. "I went over to the *Paquita*, like you said, but she wasn't aboard."

I had the impression that he was lying. He was an inordinately truthful old man, and any kind of falsehood came hard.

"That's strange," I said. "What did you do with the key?"

"Oh, I got the key all right, little lady. Thanks for the tip, too. I gave the key to the young lady that came along looking for you—"

"Mrs. Brockman?"

"Yes ma'am, the young lady on the witness stand."

"Yes?"

"She came around looking for you, after the inquest. So I told her about the key. She said she seen the car parked on the street—Miss Conway's car—and she wanted I should give her the key. So I done that. Do you reckon I done right?"

Pop's inability to resist a tip was well known. I sighed. "I guess that was all right," I murmured. I thought for a moment. "Are you sure there was nobody aboard the *Paquita*?"

"Well, I hooted and hollered around loud enough to wake the dead!" he said. But now I knew he was lying.

"Pop, where were you when I came to see you this morning—around six o'clock? Your car wasn't there."

Again he hesitated. He cleared his throat. "This morning?" he said. "Well, I don't rightly remember. I reckon I had a little errand. Guess I was just driving around somewhere."

"I see Well, thank you," I said, and hung up.

IT came to me that Pop's "little errand" concerned Amelia. Amelia had awakened to find me vanished, and the car gone too, and she had hired Pop to drive her somewhere. Where? To David Vinson's house! She had tipped Pop generously and instructed him to say nothing to me about it, and he had lied as best he could, of course.

This was just a hunch, but it was almost a certainty. Later I was to discover that I had been right.

When I had hung up I sat there for a moment thinking. Mary Ellen had slipped out early after the inquest. At any rate, she had gone to the *Paquita* to wait for me, and I had not shown up. Then she had taken Amelia's car and driven Christopher over to Mrs. Blew's house.

I wondered what she had done next, and where she had gone.

If Christopher had said to me that he "saw the man hit the lady", he had probably said it before. He had probably said it to Mary Ellen. At any rate, Mary Ellen had left the child with Mrs. Blew and hurried away on an errand of her own.

Mrs. Blew was watching me with some concern. "You don't look a bit well, dearie," she said. "Why don't you borrow my car and go down to the beach for some fresh air?"

"Thank you," I said. "That's exactly what I shall do—and I'll take Christopher with me!"

WE DID NOT drive to the beach at all. Christopher and I stopped first at the drug store. There we purchased a strawberry ice cream cone and a black and white poodle dog with velvet ears and glass button eyes. For myself I purchased a toothbrush. I had intended to stop aboard the *Paquita* long enough to pack a suitcase, but by the time we left the drug store it was four o'clock and Christopher was in a mellow mood.

I headed the car in the direction of the palisades at Corona del Mar. I had been wondering about the "window" that Christopher had spoken of. There were houses along the rim of the Palisades, but they did not command a view of the spot where Eva Singleton had met her death. I wondered if he had seen the murder from the window of a car parked at the summit.

At the rim of the palisades I parked the car for a few minutes and sat quietly saying nothing. Christopher stood up on the front seat and peered out of the window. There was nothing in sight but the long grass of the fields about us, the little bridle-path leading down the incline, and far off the channel and the boats, and the blue sea.

"Do you like it up here Christopher?" I inquired.

"Yes," he said gravely, "look at the boats!"

"Can you see any people down there?" I asked.

"Nope," he said.

I waited. He swung the black and white poodle by its velvet tail.

"My dog's name is Bobby," he said.

"That's nice."

"Bobby would like an ice cream cone now," he said.

"But, darling, you just had one!"

"My dog would like one for his own self!"

He looked at me disarmingly with Eric Conway's wide-set eyes, and I overcame

an impulse to turn him across my knee and paddle his small behind.

"All right," I said. "All right, Christopher. Echo will buy you another ice cream cone if you tell Echo where you saw the man hit the lady. Was it down there, down by the ocean, darling?"

"What?" he said.

"Well, what did the lady do when the man hit her?"

He was silent for a moment, thinking about it. "She went bang, bang, bang!"

"Oh!" I said, "Oh!"

He began to jump up and down and beat the toy dog against the back of the seat. "Bang, bang, bang, bang!" he shouted. "All the way down!"

"Down where, dear?"

"Bang!"

"Christopher, there'll be no ice cream cone for Bobby if you aren't a good boy. Now tell Echo where you were!"

"In the window!" said Christopher. "In the window! Bang! Bang!"

I put my arm around him. "Was it in the house, baby?" I whispered. "Was it the window of your room?"

"Sure!" he said.

Grownups can be very slow to comprehend. I knew now that Christopher and I had been talking about two different murders. I held him tight.

From the window of his room I felt sure he had seen a second murder.

## XIX

MRS. BLEW LOOKED AT ME a bit strangely when I brought Christopher back. I thrust him towards her.

"Here!" I remember saying. "Here he is! He has had two ice cream cones and will probably be sick!" Then I turned and ran back to the car.

She raised her quavering voice. "Where—?" she commenced to say. Then she stopped. I know that she knew something was seriously wrong.

I started the car and then stopped it again, and jumped out to hurry back to her. She was waiting there in the doorway looking startled and worried, and wonderfully kind.

"Don't let anyone take him away from you!" I cried. "Don't give him to anyone while I'm gone! Not *anyone*!"

"Not even his mother?" she asked.

"His mother won't be back for him to-night," I said. "I'm almost sure of that!"

"Well, don't you worry, dearie. He can stay here with Bessie as long as he wants to!"

"Oh, thank you!" I said. "Thank you!"

Then I got into the car again and drove off in the direction of David Vinson's house.

I DROVE slowly, not having any plan in mind nor any eagerness to get there, and on the way I stopped to telephone the ranch. The telephone rang for a long while, and finally Eric answered it. I recognized his voice.

"This is Echo Ware," I told him. "Is Miss Amelia there?"

"Amelia?" he said with vague surprise. "Amelia isn't here, Echo. In fact, I guess nobody is here but me. David came over this afternoon to take Kathie and Feeba somewhere. I don't know where. I've been writing all day, upstairs."

"Oh," I said. I tried to think of some reason or explanation for the telephone call.

"Well, when Miss Amelia comes in," I said, "will you tell her that I apologize for any inconvenience I may have caused her?"

"Inconvenience?"

"Yes. You see, I borrowed her car last night—and by some sort of mix-up she hasn't it back yet. But I'm sure it is in good hands."

There was a pause while he seemed to be attempting to clarify the situation in his own mind. "Well," he said, "don't be too concerned about it, Echo. Amelia can always manage to take care of herself."

When I was about to hang up he said suddenly, "Wait!"

"What is it, Eric?"

"I've just looked out of the window, and there's a car in the driveway. Do you want me to see if Amelia has come in? I don't know how long it has been there, Echo. I haven't heard anyone—"

"Please do!"

He was gone for a while and presently he came back. His voice sounded so strange I hardly recognized it.

"No, there's nobody here," he said.

"What is the matter, Eric. Is something wrong?"

"No," he said, "no," there's nothing wrong." And quite abruptly he hung up.

I hung up the receiver and sat there for a moment thinking. Something had been the matter. I wondered where Amelia was. I dreaded to go on toward Vinson's house. I wondered who would be there. I did not want to meet any of them, but the thought of encountering Amelia alone was unnerving.

But when I got there the place was vacant. Vinson's convertible coupe was not in its accustomed spot on the graveled turn-out at the roadside. The parking spot was empty, with late afternoon shadows slanting across it.

I knocked very loudly, because I was afraid, but there was no sound within. Then I tried the door, and to my surprise it swung open.

But I had no intention of going inside. "I should go into Christopher's room," I thought, "and look from the window!" But I was too frightened.

The path which led to the front door continued on around the side of the house at a sharp incline, and from there it ran along a shoulder of land that jutted out to a little rustic summer-house, with a wonderful view of the hillside below, and the sea far off, and the town lying half-hidden between.

I followed the path very quietly, not wanting to break the silence. A brown lizard scurrying across the gravel startled me into a fit of trembling. My steps lagged. It seemed such a long way along the path to the summer-house.

Drifting in blue space, directly before me, three buzzards wheeled lazily.

I went into the summer-house and looked over the edge of the railing. Far below, something dark fluttered on a ledge. It fluttered like cloth.

Then I was sliding down the face of the hill, praying a sort of wordless prayer. The buzzards, circling, made no sound. As I reached the ledge a fourth rose languidly into the air, on ragged wings. It hovered overhead, close for a moment, tremendous and horrible. I saw its soiled vulture beak and the sharp eyes looking at me without interest or alarm. Then I screamed at it.

I crawled to the great bundle of cloth upon the ledge.

But it was the body of Amelia.

**I WAS SHOCKED**, but I could not be sorry that she was dead. I had no feeling about her at all. Even in death she could not be pitiful.

And, finally, I climbed back up the embankment, numb with shock but noting, nevertheless, the footprints of someone who had been there before me. They were deep in the soft, loose topsoil of the hill. I wondered if Mary Ellen's slim feet had made them.

"Now I must notify the police!" I thought. But I wanted to delay as long as possible. I stood beside the car for a few minutes, lingering in front of the house that had seemed so frightening before.

The shock of finding Amelia dead had driven away the more nebulous feeling of terror I had for the house. What I had really feared most of all had been meeting Amelia there. Now she was dead. I hadn't been conditioned yet to fear her murderer.

It seems incredible, but I even stopped to look into the glove compartment of Mrs. Blew's car, and finding a clothes brush there, went to work rather shakily, removing the dirt from my beautifully grey suit.

Then, seated on the running board, I stripped off my ruined nylons, and carefully cleaned my grey kid pumps with what was left of them.

After that I combed my disheveled hair which was matted with tiny pieces of twigs. But I could do nothing with my makeup. I was shaking too violently.

If anyone had come along then I don't know how I could have explained such erratic behavior. But I knew perfectly well what I was doing, and why. I was simply stalling for time, for Mary Ellen's sake.

I did not know where she had gone, nor what her errand was. But, if it was so vital to her that it cancelled all other considerations, I wanted her to have time to accomplish it.

I knew that she had not come to me for help of any kind. She had wanted to dispose of Christopher safely for the time being. She had not even wanted to see me. I was sure of this, because Mrs.

Blew was not so formidable a person that her objections to awaking me could not have been overridden.

"Wherever Mary Ellen went," I thought, "she must have wanted to go alone."

Once the alarm was given I knew that she would be picked up at once in Amelia's big yellow Mercedes. Pop Seely would tell the police; the police would look for the car, and it would be instantly recognized anywhere.

My meditations were interrupted by the sound of a police siren far down the hill. It was repeated, coming closer. I slammed into gear, turned the car on the narrow road, and drove on up the grade.

At the top of the hill I parked and walked to the outer edge of the road where I had a partial view through the trees. From there it was not possible to see the front of Vinson's house, but I saw all that was necessary to see. As I watched the loop of the road below two cars came along it. The first was the police car, and behind it I recognized David Vinson's convertible coupe.

So the terrible news was out. Tomorrow all the details of it would be in the newspapers.

I started to drive on aimlessly, wondering what best to do. By this time it was six o'clock, and evening was closing in. I thought briefly of going back to Mrs. Blew's house. But I knew that she would take good care of Christopher. He could not have been in better hands.

I tried to think now, what I would have done had I been Mary Ellen. The normal thing would be to go to someone she trusted for help. Allen Brockman had been her refuge in the past. I supposed that she would go to him. I wondered where she would hope to find him.

Eric was the man she loved, but she had no way of knowing that he was at the ranch, and I doubted that she would go to him in any case. Then suddenly I remembered the strange note in Eric's voice when I talked to him.

I decided to drive on to the ranch.

**IT WAS NOT** yet dark when I got there. A sedan that I had never seen before stood in the driveway, but nobody was home, it seemed, not even Eric.

I knocked on the front door repeatedly,



and then stepped back into the driveway to toss pebbles at the upper windows, but there was no response at all.

The sedan in the driveway was a doctor's car. On the steering wheel there was a note addressed to "Allen". It was written on a folded piece of paper and pinned to the wheel. I opened it and read in a squarish handwriting: "Allen—I must see you quickly. Am waiting in the willows to the left of the turnoff. Drive by in the car and I will come out. M. E."

I put the note back on the steering wheel, wondering how long it had been there. Then I drove my own car around to the back of the shed where it would not be seen, either from the house or the road, and started down the hill on foot.

In the fading light the tops of the willows were visible a half mile away. I began to wish, now, that I had brought my coat. The little land breeze was suddenly quite cold. I walked as fast as I dared, striving for silence.

The clump of willows to the left of the turnoff was certainly a perfect place for a rendezvous. The trees grew in a staggered row some distance from the road and parallel to it. Their great festooned branches bowed to the ground; and mixed with them were the wide trunks of cottonwoods, and a few slim alders. It was a perfect place to hide. Anyone waiting there could watch a car approach and identify its occupant—as long as daylight lasted—and yet not be seen.

But it could be approached quite stealthily on foot. Walking down the hill, across country, I wondered how often in the past Mary Ellen had followed this same route to meet Eric.

The birds were quiet now, and bats had begun to fly. They darted overhead in zigzag flight, and somewhere far off I heard an owl calling. Now I realized how loud the sound of my car must have been in all this stillness. I had not driven past the willows on my way up because they were beyond the turnoff, but Mary Ellen must have heard the car (if she were still waiting here) and it must have caused her to wonder, if it had not frightened her.

By the time I reached the grove darkness had settled down like a chilly blanket. I wondered whether to shiver there for an

indefinite length of time and watch and wait, or whether to call to her.

But something, some sort of instinct, caused me to hold my tongue. I suppose a half hour went by. I sat down against the trunk of a cottonwood, protected from the wind, and hugged my arms around me. The thin moon looked down very mildly and innocently from the West.

And then all at once a strange thing happened. A bird sang! In the cold darkness I heard the poignant, descending notes of the little canyon wren. It is a song that can be heard on almost any wooded hillside in Southern California on a warm summer day—but never on a chilly February night!

Then it was answered, and someone was walking in the grove.

"Mary Ellen," said Eric's voice, "where are you?"

## XX

### I COULD NOT SEE HIM CLEARLY.

He came along the edge of the trees, and stopped about thirty feet from me.

The wind was rustling the dry grasses, but every sound was so distinct that I was afraid to move. There was the sound of a car opening softly, and someone getting out and walking towards him.

"Hello, Mary Ellen," he said in his gentle voice.

"Hello, Eric."

"What have you there?"

"It's Amelia's car," she said softly. "I drove it into the grove, out of sight. I've been waiting here since two o'clock."

"Aren't you cold?"

"No," she said. "There's a lap robe in the car. I was warm enough."

"Aren't you hungry?"

"Yes, I'm hungry. But it doesn't matter."

There was a pause. "I read your note to Allen," he said, "hours ago. I wasn't going to do anything about it. But then when he didn't show up I—I thought I would come down here and find out what is the matter."

"That was very kind," she said stiffly.

"What is the matter, Mary Ellen?"

"I can't tell you just at the moment. Do you know where Allen is?"

"No, I don't."



"I left the note in the car a little after one o'clock," she murmured. "It has been all this while."

"How long were you going to wait for him?"

"I—I don't know."

"But you will not let me help you?"

"No."

They lit a cigarette. I saw the flare of light, and their profiles close together for a moment; then darkness again. Their cigarettes glowed like twin fireflies.

"It seems strange," he said. "Now that we are here together we have nothing to say to each other."

"Do you feel that way? I don't feel that way at all. But it has been such a long while. I feel shy—almost as if we were strangers."

"We *are* strangers," he said sadly.

"Perhaps you would like us to be, Eric, but that is something that was established long ago, and we are not. You should know by now that you can't discard the past."

"But you can outgrow it, Mary Ellen. You aren't still carrying a torch for me, are you?"

"No, I am not. I know now that there is no such thing as romantic love—except in fiction and the adolescent mind."

"You seem to have grown up," he said, almost grimly.

There was another pause. "What did you and Allen talk about this morning?" she asked suddenly.

"Well, he talked about you, Mary Ellen. And I listened to what he had to say. I didn't know, you see, that you had married him."

"What did you say?"

"He said that you have a handsome little boy."

"Yes, Christopher is handsome," she said gently.

After another pause, an embarrassed one, she said, "Everything has straightened out for you, hasn't it, Eric! I can sense it, even standing here talking to you in the dark that you are working on a good novel. You can go on, now, and nothing will destroy you. I had a sort of maternal yearning about you—as if you were a sick child that I had abandoned. But there was nothing that I could do—"

"It must have been terrible for you," he said. "I know that it hurt you. It hurt

your pride. You felt that you had been rejected as a woman. But that was not so at all! To me you were the most desirable thing in the world. There could never be anyone like you."

She did not reply.

"You are shivering," he said. "Let's get into the car, out of the wind." I heard them walk over to the car together and get into it, and I was thankful that it was an open model. Their voices still came to me distinctly.

"I'm not concerned about you any more," she said, "but at first I did not see how I could go on living. It is a very bitter thing to have loved a man who is no good. I wanted to be proud of you, and I am!"

"That sounds like the romantic kind of love that you are all through with," he said gently. "Why are you proud of me, Mary Ellen?"

"Because of the book."

"What book?"

"The one you are writing."

"Oh," he said. Then after an odd pause he added, "It is going to be a good job."

"Yes, I know that."

"—And it is about romantic love."

"Oh, no!"

"It is about you, Mary Ellen. Not about your lovely face, but about your very complicated simplicity, and your terror and your terrible pride."

SHE said nothing for a while, and then she said, "There is something I want to tell you—now. You will know it some day soon, anyway. It is about the manuscript that you sent to Allen."

There was a sort of tension in the air all of a sudden.

"He never received it, Eric. It went to my address in Nevada, and when I saw that it was from you—I—I—opened it. I didn't at first intend to do what I later did—"

Her voice faltered and became a whisper. "I opened it, Eric, because I was angry. I thought it was another one of your love pulps, and that it was about me—that perhaps you had written me off in a cheap novel. David had warned me that was what you would do—and I had to know. Then I read it, and it was very fine."

Still he was silent.

"I was going to write to you, but then I thought it would be futile. I read the note you had sent along with it—to Allen, and I knew that you would not publish the book. I supposed you were still afraid of Amelia. And I wanted it published."

"Why?" he said.

She seemed to think about it for a moment. "Not so much for your sake—it was partly that, but mostly it was for my own. It is so very terrible to have loved someone and to have had it end as it did."

"Yes."

"It wasn't the money. I had no idea it would bring so much money. I haven't used any of it for myself."

His voice sounded tender. "What did you do with it?"

"I—I didn't know what to do with it. There was so much. And finally I put it all into an annuity for you."

"For me?"

"Yes. I was going to use some of it for Christopher. It would have been nice to think that you were providing for Christopher, but that was rather sentimental, I suppose. I never felt that you owed it to him."

"Do I owe something to Christopher?" he asked, still in that tenderly amused tone of voice.

"No, I don't feel that you do, Eric. That is an idea that I discarded along with romantic love. We were caught, and I had a child—"

"Mary Ellen!" he said. There was another pause. When he spoke again I can't describe how his voice sounded.

"I didn't know," was all he said.

"Allen would not let me tell you."

"I suppose not. What he told me this morning was quite different," he said.

"What did he say?"

"He told me about 'The Witches' Pool'. He said that he did not know until this morning that you had published it. He said that he came at once to tell me."

"That is perfectly true, Eric. I didn't tell him until today. We talked together about it this morning, not exactly angrily but very coldly. He said that perhaps it would be better if we were divorced now. He thought what I had done was utterly inexcusable and he felt that it humiliated him deeply. He had married me, he said, because I needed someone. He had been

concerned for me because he loved my mother—for no other reason than that. We never lived together, Eric."

"It is strange that he should have told me quite a different story."

"No, it isn't strange. But what did he say?"

"That you were very bitter towards me, Mary Ellen. That you had published the manuscript maliciously. He said, 'You should know by now, Eric, that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.'"

"You believed him."

"No, somehow I didn't believe him. That is why I went for a long walk after I found your note to him—and why I decided to come here looking for you. I didn't want you to feel scorned—God knows! And I didn't want you to be bitter! All the while Allen was talking to me I had the strangest feeling that it was none of his business. It was something entirely between you and me. I felt that he was meddling, and that he didn't know what he was talking about. And all that time I didn't know about the child—I thought Christopher was his!"

"Christopher is mine, Eric—not yours at all! Biologically you happen to be his father, but that is past!"

"That doesn't make sense to me. Does it to you?" he asked gently.

"Yes, Eric, it certainly does! You are very dear to me, but not because of Christopher! Simply, you *are*. And I think that David and Allen are right, both of them! Allen has tried to turn us forever against each other—for our own good. I think he is sincere. Allen always does his duty!"

"I see."

"That is why I was looking for him. Because there is this terrible thing that has happened. I must tell you now. But it will be a shock to you, Eric!"

"What is it?"

"It is about Amelia."

"Amelia?"

She told him quite bluntly, then, that Amelia was dead. He made no comment.

"I found her in the canyon behind David's house!"

"When?"

"At about noon, Eric. I found her there. And that is why I came looking for Allen. I had to talk to someone before I called the police. She was murdered, Eric!"

## XXI

"SHE COULDN'T HAVE fallen!" she said. "I looked down from the summer-house and saw her there—and then I climbed down to her, but she was dead!"

"It—it isn't possible!"

"Someone killed her. Someone hit her on the head in the summer-house and pushed her over the railing. There is a clump of bamboo growing beside the railing. There was blood on some of the leaves."

(She had been more observant than I, it seemed.)

"She was hurt, and then she brushed past the bamboo stalks as she fell."

Mary Ellen did not say anything to him about her reason for having gone into the summer-house in the first place, and he did not ask her.

I wondered if Christopher had said to his mother that he "saw the man hit the lady." I felt quite certain that he had.

Eric's voice was still incredulous, as if he could not quite believe her. "What did you do, Mary Ellen?"

"When I was sure that she was dead, I came here looking for Allen."

"But, I mean, did you touch her?"

"I'm not sure. I—I think perhaps I did."

"Did anyone see you?"

"I don't know. I was frightened, I wasn't thinking very clearly. There was nobody in the house. David wasn't there. His car was gone. What shall I do?"

He was silent for a moment, thinking. "We had better talk, Mary Ellen," he said. "It may be our last chance!"

"Yes," she said, "yes. I'd better tell you everything, right from the beginning. I'll tell you the whole thing—"

She told him about Eva's death, and about the two inquests. "They wanted to keep you entirely out of it," she said, "so that we would not see each other, and so that you wouldn't see Christopher." An almost complacent little note crept into her voice. "He looks like you!" she said.

"Was David in it, too?"

"Yes, all of them were against us, Eric. Well—not Kathie. Kathie knew about Christopher. She knew, somehow, all along,

and she wanted to have him at the ranch. I know that. I'm sure."

"She was afraid to tell me," he said.

"Yes. Then last night at David's house they had a council of war."

"Who?"

"The three of them—David and Allen and Amelia. Amelia drove up in her car early in the evening to talk with David. I started to leave the room, but Allen said, 'No, I want Mary Ellen to hear what we have to say. I want it finished once and for all, and tomorrow I'm going to take her away from here!'"

"What did he mean by that?"

"I don't know. In the morning we settled it quite differently—but that was later." Her voice quavered slightly. "Last night we were all there together, but I was an outsider. It was a council of war about the inquest today."

"I see."

"They were talking a sort of double-talk, Eric," she said, "because they were afraid—I see it now—that I would find out you were at the ranch! They were worried."

"What about?"

"They were worried about what Echo Ware would say at the inquest in the morning, and Amelia had decided that they should offer Echo the *Paquita* in return for saying as little as possible. But David did not want to sell the *Paquita* without consulting you, and he did not want to do anything that might upset you while you were at work on a book. He didn't want to stir up old memories. He said your work was all that was really important, and that he could keep Echo quiet at the inquest by an easier method."

"David said that?"

"YES, he did. The old man who keeps the bait shack told him that Echo broke into the *Paquita* and slept aboard on the night Eva's body was found. So I went to the inquest, myself, in the morning after the others had left. Echo has been a friend to me, Eric. I like her. And when David began to make vaguely threatening remarks I took the stand and told them—well, almost everything."

"I said that I had been in touch with Eva, and had made an engagement to meet her. I told them all about it. And then

it didn't matter, after all, because the verdict was 'accidental drowning'!"

"It matters now," he said softly.

"Yes."

"What was Amelia's attitude last night?"

"She said that you are not—that you are not right in the head, Eric! That you never have been! She said that she has always known that what you did long ago you did deliberately—and she insinuated that you might possibly have killed Eva. She felt that she could watch you, away from everything on the ranch, and that you could do your work. And she wanted to relieve you of any financial responsibilities — especially since 'The Witches' Pool' was so successful. She was afraid you might do something foolish with the money!"

"I see."

"She and David had a terrific fight. He said he distrusted her motives. He said you had a great talent and that civilized society had never been organized for you. But that you were worth a thousand normal, average citizens. Then he rushed into his library and got out a copy of Thomas Mann's essay about Dostoyefsky and read a passage from it about the curse of genius."

"I'm not that good," said Eric dryly. They both laughed a bit shakily. They sounded very normal.

"Then David accused Amelia of wanting to get control of the money—that she was a greedy old woman. He said that if anyone handled your finances for you it would be himself. I guess it was the end of a beautiful friendship between them. And all the while none of them knew that it was I who had published the book."

HE still sounded faintly amused when he spoke. "How did you ever expect to get away with it, Mary Ellen?"

"I—I guess I didn't care. I never thought about it. It was never the money, you see. I didn't much care what happened. But last night I realized all at once that I would have to tell. I thought I would tell Allen this morning because the others—it was none of their business—it was really nobody's business but yours and mine."

"Yes," he said.

"Last night a lot of things came to

light, however. It seems that Amelia had read 'The Witches' Pool' quite by chance. The local librarian recommended it. And, of course, when she read it Amelia knew at once that it was yours. She wrote to David about it in Bermuda. David came back and persuaded you to come to town for a visit. When you didn't seem to know anything about it, Amelia thought that Allen had stolen the manuscript."

"Amelia would!" he said softly.

"They still thought so last night for a while, but he convinced them that he had known nothing about it. It was wrong of me to let them suspect him."

"What did they do?"

"Last night?"

"I mean, when they thought Allen had published it."

"Well, I guess they were divided in their opinions. David didn't really seem to care about the money. He's deeply devoted to you, Eric. He hates me, but I can't dislike him, somehow. I think all that mattered to him was that you had written something genuine and solid. At least, that is how I believe he felt. But Amelia was frantic about the money. She dreamed of hundreds of thousands of dollars! And she persuaded David to use his civic influence to have an item put in the local paper about the author of the current best seller being in town."

"Why?"

"Amelia knew that I still subscribed to the paper, and she assumed that Allen would see the item. It was just a little trial balloon, simply to see if anything would come of it. But I saw the item, instead, and thought it meant that you were in town. I hopped the first plane from Las Vegas and arrived on David's doorstep the same day. It was not exactly what he had planned."

"When was that?"

"Last Sunday. I was probably the last person on earth that David cared to see. He asked me for Allen's address, and I guess he must have wired Allen to come and get me—because Allen certainly came. He arrived on Monday."

"What was Allen's reaction?"

"Last night?"

"Well, yes, last night."

"Allen convinced them that he had nothing to do with publishing the manu-

script. And in his gentle way he was angry. His professional dignity had been attacked, and I know that I was responsible. I—I wanted to tell them that it was I, but I waited until morning."

"What did he say?"

"When I told him? He told me that he had stood by me through everything because of his love for my mother. He said that she had been as frivolous as I, and had rejected his love. He said that he was through with me, but he would do what he could to keep me from returning to you—for my own sake and for yours. He said, over and over, 'I bear Eric no malice for what he did as a child.'"

HER VOICE broke, but she went on again, "That is why he said what he did to you today, Eric. He cautioned me that should I ever try to go back to you, he would help Amelia in trying to have you declared incompetent, and that he would take Christopher away from me!"

"He would have quite a difficult time doing that," said Eric mildly.

"I don't know! I don't know! When he finds out that I have talked to you, I don't know what he will do!"

There was a pause.

"Do you know what I think?" Eric said. "I think he is in love with you, Mary Ellen, as hopelessly and jealously as he was in love with your mother!"

"I—I never thought of that!"

He lit another cigarette for her. "Where did Amelia go after they all talked together last night?"

"She got into her car, Eric and said she was going over to have a talk with Echo, aboard the *Paquita*. She had a key—your key—in case Echo wasn't there."

"I see," he said. "Whatever happened, I know that Echo borrowed the car from her and drove out to talk to me in the middle of the night. When she telephoned me today it was to say that the keys of the car had been given to the wrong person—that Amelia apparently hadn't gotten them."

"I took them. I went down to the boat to wait for Echo after the inquest. The old man who keeps the bait shack told me about the keys, and so I took them. He didn't know when or where Amelia had

gone—or, at least, he said he didn't know. I don't trust him!"

"What time did Allen leave the house this morning—after you talked with him?"

"It was early, Eric, about seven-thirty."

"He got to the ranch at about eight. It is a half-hour drive."

"He must have gone there directly."

"Yes. Allen and I talked for half an hour, and then David dropped in to take Feeba to town. I know now that it was to the inquest. That was about eight-thirty. Allen walked out to the car with him and didn't come back. I supposed that they drove away together, and I went back to work. Feeba must have returned before noon, for she brought my lunch on a tray."

"Was Allen's car in front of the house all day?"

"I don't know, Mary Ellen. I didn't notice it until late this afternoon when Echo telephoned. That was when I went downstairs and found your note. A dozen cars could have come and gone during the day while I was writing. And I know that David came back around four o'clock and took Kathie and Feeba away with him."

"They didn't come back?"

"I don't know. They could have."

"A dozen cars have gone by up the grade since I've been here."

"Yes," he said. "There have been several while I was taking my walk on the other side of the hill."

There was another silence. "Perhaps we had better go back to the house, now," he said, "and telephone the police."

"No!" she cried. "No!"

"Are you afraid of the house?"

"Yes!"

"Why?"

"I don't know! I don't know, Eric! Let's not go back to it now!"

"What do you want to do?"

"Let's drive to the Police Station."

He was silent for a moment.

"All right," he said at last, "if that is what you want to do."

He stepped on the starter, and the motor roared in the stillness. The headlights went on, cutting a lane of brightness through the underbrush. Eric backed the car out into the road, and swung it around in the direction of town.

I got painfully to my feet, stiff with cold. In the distance I could hear the big Mercedes roaring down the highway, and then almost at once there was the sound of a siren. I knew exactly what had happened. The police had been watching for them a mile down the pike.

## XXII

**I**T TOOK ME FORTY MINUTES to walk back to the ranch in the darkness. There were lights burning, now, in the windows as I walked towards the house. They were a sort of beacon guiding my steps.

Somehow, I did not share Mary Ellen's fear of the place. I was more afraid of the darkness in back of the shed where I had parked Mrs. Blew's coupe. I had no intention of braving it alone.

As I neared the house I wondered what to do. Probably Miss Kathie and Feeba had come back, and undoubtedly David Vinson had come with them. They would be glad to have me there and Feeba would fix me a hot drink.

I walked boldly up to the front door and knocked. The door was opened after an interval by Miss Kathie herself. She had come quietly, in her unerring way along the hall, and now she stood in the lighted doorway.

"It's Echo!" she said, without a word having been spoken.

"Yes, Miss Kathie. It's I. Are you all right?"

"Yes. David brought us back a while ago, and now he has gone."

"Gone!"

"He had to go back to his house." In her vague way she was not at all frightened. "He wanted us to stay the night, but I would rather be here. It has been a shock to me, I suppose. Besides, Feeba is seeing visions. She wanted to come home, too."

"Seeing visions?"

"Yes, Feeba sees visions sometimes."

"Then you two are all alone here!"

I said, aghast. "You're not afraid?"

"There's nothing to fear now, Echo." She hesitated, and then she said, "David told me something that hasn't been made public yet. They have the murderer. They have him in custody!"

"David Vinson said so?"

"The police told him, in confidence. But they would not tell him who it is. They expect a confession very soon. David thinks it is the old man who sold bait, down by the *Paqueta*."

"Pop Seely!"

"Yes. That is who he thinks it is."

"Miss Kathie, may I have a drink?"

She had put her hand vaguely to her hair. "I wonder if they know," she said, and then, "Come into the kitchen, Echo, you are trembling."

I had dreaded having to explain my disheveled state, and my mysterious arrival, but she could not see the former and did not notice the latter.

We walked along the hall to the brightly lighted kitchen where Feeba sat in her rocking chair, rocking and chanting to herself. She did not look up when we came in. She paid no attention to us. Miss Kathie went straight to the cupboard.

Feeba stirred in her chair. "Miss Amelia, she standing right beside me, bright like an angel!" announced Feeba. I turned my head involuntarily and looked, but there was certainly nothing there.

Miss Kathie paid no attention. Her hand, light as a moth, touched the row of bottles along the shelf, and closed upon the brandy bottle. She poured me a drink and handed it to me. I drank it and felt better.

"Now, tell me about Pop Seely," I said.

Miss Kathie lifted her head. "I am thankful it was he," she said softly. "I was afraid it was someone else."

"Who?"

She shook her head. "I was afraid it was someone else," she repeated.

The story, as David Vinson had told her, was briefly this: They had first suspected Pop Seely because of a telephone call that had been traced to his shack. Miss Amelia had telephoned to the ranch very early in the morning from there, to say that she did not have her car, and had hired someone to drive her up to David's house.

Feeba answered the telephone. She was already down in the kitchen, and had taken the message on the extension telephone.

Amelia had told Feeba that she planned to visit a while in David's summer-house until his household was awake, and then

she intended to ask him to drive her up to the ranch to pick up Feeba for the inquest. But Amelia had apparently never arrived at David's doorstep. Something had happened. David had driven out to the ranch that morning, apparently quite by chance.

Pop Seely had at first strenuously denied having seen Miss Amelia at all, but he was identified as the same man who had been seen with Miss Amelia, early in the morning, having a light breakfast at the same cafe where I had stopped only a few minutes earlier, to while away the time before daybreak.

Confronted with this evidence, Pop Seely had confessed that Miss Amelia had hired him to drive her to David's house.

"I left her at the curb," he told them. And he continued vigorously to deny having killed her. "I never touched a hair of her head!" he kept on repeating.

Nobody had been concerned about Amelia's absence at first, because her comings and goings had always been strictly her own private concern. But when she did not appear at the inquest it was David Vinson who had begun to worry.

"It was he who found the body," said Miss Kathie.

"Oh," I said.

"David was the only one who was fond of her," murmured Miss Kathie. There was a strained little silence.

"I cannot love her now simply because she is dead," she said. "And Eric always disliked her bitterly. Until lately he feared her. She dominated him completely. I'm thankful that the murderer is known. I was afraid that the police would suspect Eric."

Her calm, sightless eyes turned towards me. "And towards the last even David had begun to be afraid. When David found her he came here at once to get Feeba and me. He did not say so, but I think he was afraid to leave us here with Eric."

"Do you think it was that?"

"Yes." There was another pause.

"It was Allen Brockman who influenced David's thinking. David has a great deal of confidence in Allen. And Allen—Allen is a very just man, but in his heart he has never been able to forgive Eric—" She sighed. "It is one thing to forgive in the head, and another in the heart, I think."

"I know," I said, "I know."

"Eric was such a queer little boy," she mused. "Even when he was very small I think Allen had a distinct aversion for him, even before—"

"Yes."

"And when Eric grew older Allen disapproved of him—of the wild things he did. But Eric was good to me. We rode about together when he was a boy. He's a good horseman, and so am I. We would ride down to the headlands together."

"Yes." I thought for a moment. "I think that Dr. Brockman has always been unconsciously jealous of Eric—of his magnetism, and his good looks."

"Perhaps you are right."

Then her tone changed. "You are still shivering," she said. She went unerringly to the stove, lifted the lid, and added some kindlings from the wood box while Feeba sat there unheeding, as if she were the blind one.

I was not shivering, because of the cold, however, I was shivering from excitement and I continued to shiver.

"In a way Dr. Brockman was very cruel to Eric," I said, thinking aloud. "It was he, after all, who annulled Mary Ellen's marriage before the thing could be straightened out—even though he was a physician interested in psychiatry. Then he married her himself."

MISS KATHIE shook her head. "He did it to protect her from Amelia. He did it because she was Lydia's daughter. Mary Ellen looked so much like her mother, and he loved Lydia so!"

"Yes, I know."

"When Lydia was dead he built her a beautiful marble tomb, like a shrine."

"Yes."

Her face turned towards me. "You have seen it?"

"Yes." I got reluctantly to my feet.

She went on. "Mary Ellen was a tiny baby then, But he took her and the nurse away with him. He wanted always to take care of her. He said it was his duty."

She stood up, tall and grey, "Are you leaving?" she said.

"Yes," I stammered, "I—I must go now. I've borrowed a kind stranger's car. But when I have returned it I shall try to hire a cab and come back here tonight. Would you like that?"



"You are very kind! But really I am not frightened. Eric will be back soon, I'm sure. He probably has gone to the police station, too, with Allen."

I made no comment. Feeba had stopped rocking, and she opened her round eyes and looked at me now.

"She dead!" she told me. "Miz Amelia, she dead! But she right here!"

"Go to bed, Feeba," said Miss Kathie gently. "You go to bed now and get some sleep!"

Feeba didn't move. "Miz Amelia, she right here! I done see her! I done hear her! She say, 'Beware!' She say Death a-ho-vering over this house! I done hear her!"

"That will do, Feeba!" I said, "Miss Kathie told you to go to bed, and she is in charge now, you know."

Feeba looked at me glumly. She did not obey. "Miss Amelia, she still here! She still right here for sure!"

I looked at Miss Kathie. "I'll come back tonight if I can!" I told her. Feeba closed her eyes and began to rock again.

I went out to the car, leaving them there in the brightly lighted kitchen.

On the way back to Mrs. Blew's house I thought of many things.

AN incredibly repugnant idea had touched my worried brain—brushed it lightly in passing. It was that Miss Kathie had suspected Eric. Apparently she had rejected the thought, too. Neither of us was willing to harbor the suspicion for a moment.

It was difficult for me to believe that Pop Seely, irascible and secretive though he was, could have killed anyone. And yet I determined to believe it, to accept it.

I knew nothing whatsoever about homicide—that was strictly in Tony's department—but even a casual perusal of the daily newspaper will convince anyone that the criminal type is not readily recognizable. The mark of Cain can be well concealed.

There had always been a kindly little twinkle in Pop's old eyes. I thought to myself how often people who should know—people who considered themselves experts—were fooled. Too often the dreadful sex-murderer is revealed to be

a kindly old man or an engaging youth with a tousled mop of curly hair!

Driving on through the quiet valley I made the right-hand turn into Coast Boulevard. It was ten-thirty by the time I reached Newport, and the town was buzzing with Saturday night activities. From somewhere across the water came the sound of a dance orchestra, and a saxophone, hot and sweet.

"Who would think," I mused, "that a murderer lived here, among us, an apparently nice old man who had loved his dog and minded his business!"

Then I remembered Skipper. I wondered whether anyone had remembered to feed him tonight. It might be well to make a detour in the direction of the anchorage, to investigate Skipper's welfare. Then, too, I could stop aboard the *Paquita* just long enough to pack up some things. It would take only a few minutes.

The boardwalk was by no means deserted, which pleased me. Now that the danger seemed to be over, it was still pleasant and reassuring to have people about. I parked the car and walked along in the direction of Pop's shack. The place was dark and empty. Evidently, Skipper was being cared for elsewhere.

Then I went on towards the *Paquita* which was dark also.

I had a most peculiar feeling about the *Paquita* at that moment, almost a reluctance to board her. I thought that some of the aura of fear from my last experience must still be hovering there. The white yawl had about her a waiting look which would have been difficult to analyze, but it was as if something alive were lurking there.

"Nonsense!" I said aloud, and stepped aboard.

I struck a match and found that the hatch padlock was open. This troubled me, too, although Miss Amelia must have left it that way. I went cautiously down the steps. It was not until I was down in the corridor opposite the lounge that my fear became a suffocating, a tremendous thing. I stood pressed against the panel of the passageway, fighting an enveloping faintness. I would have screamed then, but I could not.

Then Tony's voice spoke beside me.

"Echo, is that you?"

## XXIII

I COULD NOT SEE HIM, but it was Tony, all right! Then I was in his arms, and bawling like a child. "Tony!" I sobbed. "Tony! How you frightened me!"

He held me tight.

"I thought you were never coming back!" I wailed. "I thought I was never going to see you again!"

He rubbed his chin against the top of my head.

"I had begun to think the same about you, Red," he said, "having been in town since yesterday, and never able to catch up with you!"

"Since yesterday!"

"Yes."

Presently he lit the lamp, and held me off at arm's length. "You certainly look like the devil, my lovely!" he said. "Where did you get those rags?"

I giggled hysterically. "This is my new suit!"

"I guess styles must have changed."

"It was so handsome, Tony! You really should have seen it! Frightfully expensive, too! I bought it to impress you!"

"Well, you certainly impressed me!" He held me in his arms again, "You certainly impressed me in Korea, Red! I got a cabled message that you were drowned!"

"Oh!"

"Yes! The second message—the one that said it was all in fun and just for laughs—didn't catch up with me until the plane touched Honolulu."

"Tony, I am so sorry."

"But I had 'emergency leave' and I kept right on coming."

"It was a woman named Eva Singleton who was drowned. She was murdered, Tony."

"Yes, I know,"

"You know?"

"The District Attorney told me. He's an old friend. I stayed at his home last night. He told me a lot about the case, and he is the one who sent me the second cable."

"You must introduce me to your friends some time!"

"He was before your time, Red."

"Oh, I wish I'd known! I couldn't trust anyone, and there was nobody to turn to! Nobody!"

"Have you ever heard of the Police Department?"

"But they thought it was an accident."

"Oh, no, they didn't!"

"That's what the coroner's jury found!"

"Well, there's nothing conclusive about that kind of verdict, baby."

I looked at him drearily. "And now this second murder! It's all happened so quickly! And to think that it was nice old Pop Seely!"

Tony's arms dropped to his sides.

"Pop Seely?" he said. "Who sold you that stuff?"

"The police told David Vinson—very confidentially!"

"I see!" He hugged me again. "So then David Vinson told you—very confidentially?"

"Oh, no. He told Miss Kathie, and *she* told me."

He laughed softly. "They do not always tell everything," he said.

"Do you mean it *wasn't* Pop Seely?"

"I mean that they aren't taking their hair down as far as Vinson is concerned. If they told him it was Pop Seely—they told him for a reason. It would be possible for the criminal to be known—and yet there not be proof enough to convict him. Sometimes it is a waiting game."

"You—you don't mean that it was David Vinson! He—he paints so beautifully!"

Tony began to laugh, and I leaned against him and began to cry. "If I knew, dearest," he said, "I would tell you—very confidentially!"

"Oh, Tony, it all happened so quickly! All this since Tuesday—four days!" I sobbed. "Two people murdered in four days, and the murderer not caught yet!"

"Yes," said Tony, gently, "yes, my very beautiful redhead."

I leaned against him sobbing. Tony kissed my wet face.

"Stop it, baby!" he said, "stop it, stop it! You're exhausted, and you are going to bed now. You are going to get some sleep. In fact, we're both going to get some sleep. In fact, I have just been getting some—before you came in!"

BUT I had remembered something. I stiffened in his arms. "We can't, Tony!" I said. "We can't go to bed now! We have to go out to the ranch. I promised

Miss Kathie that I'd come back, She's all alone except for Feeba, and Feeba is seeing visions."

"Visions?"

"She says that Amelia Conway's ghost is standing beside her, 'bright like an angel!'"

"That I would have to see!" said Tony.

"Feeba is good company as a general rule, but I think the ghost of Miss Amelia might be a bit hard to take at the moment."

"Yes, yes, I suppose it would."

"Of course," I said, "if Eric and Mary Ellen are released, Eric will undoubtedly go back to the ranch tonight and Miss Kathie wouldn't be alone."

Tony was looking at me with a baffled expression on his face, and rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "How is that?" he inquired.

THEN I remembered that although he probably knew much more about the case than I, still he could not know what I knew about Eric and Mary Ellen.

I told him about the conversation that I had overheard. I told him in detail, ending up with my experiences with Christopher. When I had finished Tony was looking worried.

"There isn't any doubt that they will be released," he said, thinking aloud. "And after that—what?"

"What do you mean—what?"

"What would you have done if you were Mary Ellen Brockman? Would you have gone to Mrs. Blew's house to get the child, or would you have left him there for the night. Would you have had Conway drop you at Vinson's house, or would you have gone to the ranch with Conway?"

"Are you asking my opinion as a detective, Tony?"

"No, as a woman! As a detective, my lovely, I shall never trouble you for your opinion!"

"That isn't nice!" I said, "but to answer your question I shall have to ask you one: If you were Eric Conway would you wait until tomorrow to see the son you never knew you had—or would you go at once? I'm asking your opinion as a man and not as a detective."

But he was grave again, "That depends," he said slowly. "It is not so much a matter

of the man having seen the child before—as it is of the child having seen the man before!"

"Does that make sense?"

"To me it does."

I thought for a moment. "I don't get it, Tony."

"From the window Christopher apparently saw a man 'hit the lady'! When he sees the man again he is sufficiently young and uninhibited to mention the fact, in the presence of all."

I stared at him.

"Tony!" I whispered. "You can't suspect Eric Conway! He's so nice! And he knew nothing about anything that has been going on. He has been there at the ranch, all the while, writing a book."

"That's what he says. But whenever there has been a murder he has been near. Nothing happened while he was away!"

"He couldn't have gotten to David's house early this morning. He had no car. I know, because I went to the ranch during the night, and I had the car—the only car!"

I thought for a while. "Of course, there was the horse," I murmured.

"Yes, there's the horse."

"He isn't a very good horse," I said, "He's old."

Tony shook his head impatiently. "It isn't that," he said, "it is the time element. How long would it take to drive cross-country from Conway's ranch to Vinson's place?"

"Oh," I said, "goodness knows! I doubt if you could ride cross-country—it simply couldn't be done. And as for the time element—it just couldn't be done on horseback."

"Then that's that."

"Anyway," I said, "Eric didn't do it! I—I don't have to be a good detective to know that! And I hope he and Mary Ellen can be happy together this time!"

"You seem to forget that she has a husband already!"

"Oh, yes," I said, yawning, "so she has."

I leaned against Tony, "Well," I said, "and so to bed!"

"On the contrary, we are going to the ranch!"

"Tonight? But why should we go? We wouldn't be wanted now!"

"That's just what I'm thinking."

I studied him for a moment, but his face was a handsome mask. "Something is worrying you, Tony," I said.

"Not exactly worrying me—but it is just one of those things that don't quite make sense."

"What, Tony?"

"Tell me about this Dr. Brockman. Is he the rugged out-of-doors type?"

"Allen Brockman?" I said. "Good heavens, no! He's little and thin."

"Can you think of any reason why Brockman would leave his car at the ranch at nine o'clock in the morning, and strike out across fields towards town?"

"No, I can't!"

"I can't either."

"Maybe he hitched a ride on the road."

"Why should he do that? He had his car. He left his car in the driveway."

"Maybe he drove away with David Vinson in Vinson's car."

"That could be. Vinson and Feeba both swear that he didn't."

"Is that conclusive?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"What does he say about it?"

"He doesn't say."

I thought hard. "Maybe he borrowed Miss Kathie's horse. Claude could carry him down to the boulevard and come back alone."

"I know. That is possible. And I've thought of that. The horse could have been borrowed, and could have come back without anyone knowing it was gone from its stall."

"But why would Dr. Brockman do that, and leave his car?" I persisted.

"Maybe he didn't. Maybe he never went away."

"What do you mean?"

"He's missing, baby. He never showed up for questioning."

"You mean maybe something happened to him?"

"That is a possibility."

"Oh!" I said. But he wasn't telling me everything. I felt like crying again.

"It is one of several possibilities," he said. His voice faded away. He stood looking at me with tenderness and yearning.

"What a homecoming, dearest!" he said. "Here I have been dreaming of you for

four years, and then when I come home we say 'hello' and start worrying about a murderer!"

Then we moved close, and kissed for quite a long time.

## XXIV

WE LEFT MRS. BLEW'S CAR in her garage, for the house was dark. And luck was with us. In spite of the fact that it was eleven o'clock on a Saturday night, we caught a taxicab almost at once and rode directly out to the ranch.

"Perhaps we should have awakened Mrs. Blew," I mused, after we were well on our way out to the ranch. "She may have had news for us."

"She might have crowned us both with a skillet, too, and I for one wouldn't have blamed her."

"You don't know Mrs. Blew!" I said. "She is an angel of mercy."

"That's a cosy little hide-out you had there, my beautiful redhead!"

"If you are referring to the Blew residence, it looked awfully good to me—'way back in the days when I was so scared!"

"This morning, you mean?"

"Yes, this morning."

He put his arm around me. "Especially I admired your boudoir," he said, "with its Early American washstand, and the windows looking out upon the Early American back fence."

"Don't be witty!"

Then I straightened up. "How do you know so much about it?"

"I was there, last night, before you so briefly moved in. In fact, I ransacked the joint."

"Then you were the handsome stranger, the one who searched Eva Singleton's stuff!"

"That's me!" he said.

"Tony, did you find anything?"

"Nothing at all!"

"Strange!"

"Whatever she had to sell—it was all in her head, it was not on paper—unless it was destroyed with her."

"Yes."

We arrived at the ranch in thoughtful silence.

Tony paid the driver, and we walked up towards the house, past David Vinson's

convertible coupe, past the late Amelia's yellow Mercedes, past Dr. Brockman's sedan—the windows of which had been rolled up for the night, and the note removed from the steering wheel.

There were lights in the lower part of the house, and before we reached the front door it opened, and Eric Conway stood there.

"Hello, Echo," he said. "Kathie said you promised to come back. It was good of you!" He peered past me at Tony.

"I always keep my promises—sometimes," I said. "Tony came home—so I brought him along!"

It was characteristic of Eric that he never showed much surprise. His smile widened to include Tony. They shook hands.

"I'm not sure that I'm wanted here," said Tony, "at such a time—"

Eric met his eyes levelly. "Do you mean because of Amelia?" he said. "Wouldn't it be foolish of me to pretend to a sorrow that I really cannot feel?"

"Yes, I suppose it would, wouldn't it?" said Tony.

"Vinson is here, too," said Eric. We followed him down the hall.

"And Dr. Brockman?" Tony asked softly.

"Brockman isn't here."

It seemed that the parlor was seldom used. We followed Eric into the kitchen where David Vinson sat in Feeba's old rocking chair, smoking a pipe. He surrendered the rocker to me, and perched upon the kitchen table where he managed to look distinguished, as always, but greyish and tense.

"Kathie has gone to bed," Eric said to me. "I insisted that she take a sleeping pill, and she folded up about an hour ago. But she said to tell you she's glad you're here, and to take the back bedroom. She looked bad."

"You look bad yourself!" Tony said. He looked at Eric hard for a moment, and then he said abruptly, "Where's the child?"

I continued to be amazed by Tony's gaucherie. A deep flush came to Eric's face. "He isn't here."

"Not here?"

"No. Mary Ellen is staying with him at Mrs. Blew's house tonight."

"Oh." Tony looked relieved.

DAVID Vinson took his pipe out of his mouth. "If you have any more of those sleeping pills, I'll have one, too. I guess we could all use one."

"Not for us, thank you," said Tony, gruffly.

In the little silence that followed, a faucet dripped loudly in the wooden sink.

"We are both so tired," I said, "that nothing could awaken us short of a three-alarm fire."

"Well," said David Vinson, "shall we all say good-night?"

It was strange. There we were in the brightly lighted old-fashioned kitchen, four weary people carrying on a desultory conversation which dealt with murder but never mentioned it.

All of us were thinking our secret thoughts.

Presently we all went to bed.

Actually, it didn't take a three-alarm fire to awaken me. I slept lightly. I awoke in the middle of the night. For a moment I could not think where I was—and then I heard Tony's regular breathing beside me in the dark.

I sat up and listened.

Then I heard footsteps going along the hall, and into the next room. "That would be the kitchen," I thought.

I was wide awake by that time. In the stillness every sound was quite clear. I could even hear the faucet dripping.

In the kitchen there were two voices now. It seemed to be the beginning of a conversation. Then I realized that I had been awakened by the sound of a car arriving in the driveway.

Wrapping my robe about me, I slipped out of bed and crossed the room to press my ear against the wall. In the room beyond I could hear Eric's voice saying almost coldly, "You shouldn't have taken the risk, Mary Ellen!"

"I know that!" she said. "I know it now! I didn't know it then. I—I thought Christopher would have forgotten right away. I—I didn't know he would say it again."

"Well, it can't be undone now."

"I didn't dream that Mrs. Blew would think it significant. But she knew at once!"

"What did she say?"

"When she spoke to me about it tonight—I—I—said that I had taken him to a Punch-and-Judy show. Punch always hits

—hits Judy over the head, doesn't he—  
or is it the other way around?"

"But she didn't believe you."

"No, she didn't. She was very pleasant, but I knew. She suspects something. I thought about it—after I had gone to bed I tossed and turned and became more and more frantic. Then, finally I got up and dressed, and quietly called a cab. So I brought him here."

"He can't stay here, Mary Ellen!"

"I know. I've come to say good-bye."

There was a pause. "Where are you going?" he asked in a shaken voice.

"I don't know, Eric. I think I will take Allen's car and start driving—back to Nevada,"

"The police will pick you up!"

"Why?"

He did not reply. There was a longer pause.

"Well, then I shall go to them again," she said resolutely, "and tell them about Christopher!"

"No, don't do that!"

"But don't you see, Eric, he simply says the same thing over again. There's no information of any value to the police. All that he will say is that he saw the man hit the lady. Then they will let us go."

"You questioned him about it!" he said. His voice sounded frightened and accusing.

"Just casually, Eric, not to scare him!"

"I won't have it!"

"Why are you so angry?"

"I'M NOT angry, Mary Ellen, I'm frightened. I don't want them questioning him, making it a terrifying mystery—branding it in his memory!"

"But it doesn't frighten him! Don't you see—whatever it was—it was like a Punch-and-Judy show to him! He's so young. He isn't four! He loved it!"

"Don't you see, that is the whole point that I am making. Fear can be planted in a child's mind—by adults—and it festers there, and becomes a terrible thing! I know!"

"Well, I shall see to it that nothing frightens him," she said gently.

His voice rose in anger. "I won't have it, Mary Ellen! I won't have them questioning our child!"

"He's not 'our' child—he's my child!

You own no part of him. Remember that!"

"He is mine as well as yours! There's nothing you can do to change that, however much you hate me now."

"I don't hate you, Eric."

"You have every right to."

"No. I've thought that out. It was an animal attraction. That's all that it was!"

She gave a shaky little laugh. "I know all about what it was with me," she said. "I thought it out in the weeks after you had gone. I used to lie face down upon the bed and think. And the things that I thought about were—well, the sound of your voice, and the way you walk—things like that. Animal attraction was all that it was—Nature playing her tricks—"

"Don't you still believe in animal attraction?" he asked. "Even though no longer in romantic love?" I thought he was smiling, teasing her gently. She ignored it.

"—so that I would be caught," she went on, "and it was the same with you. You were caught, too."

"It was very nice—being caught."

"I never found it so!" she said, with the first trace of bitterness. But it was gone from her voice immediately, "No, that isn't true," she confessed. "I have never been happy since. But it is different with you. You don't need anyone. I suppose David and Allen were right. Men are not all potential husbands. I simply chose to love the wrong one. You were meant to work alone."

"Nobody was meant to be alone," he said.

"No, I think David was right about you, Eric!"

They were silent for a moment. "You are shivering," he said gently.

"It's cold."

"But you aren't cold, Mary Ellen."

"No," she said, "I'm not."

There was a very long pause. Then she said, "It is wrong for us to be kissing each other. I'm married to Allen."

"No, you're not—you never really were! You know that! You know that!"

"What are we going to do?" she asked in a low voice.

"I don't know. I don't know."

"He said he would set me free—that he wanted that."

"He said so—but he didn't mean it."

"No, he didn't mean it. I know that,

too. I'm afraid of him, Eric, I don't know what he might do."

"He has always been in love with you, Mary Ellen—ever since you were little. He never wanted anyone else to marry you!"

"I wonder. I don't know. I know that he has always hated you, Eric. He tried not to—but he couldn't help it—because of my mother!"

"It wasn't that, Mary Ellen. It was jealousy! He took care of your mother—but I do not believe he really wanted her to live—nor my father, either. I think he couldn't bear to have her marry someone else. I believe that, Mary Ellen!"

"What makes you think so?" Her voice was very low.

"The beautiful tomb he built her! It was as though—somehow—he wanted to compensate—it was a sop to his conscience!"

"Then you think he let her die!"

"Perhaps not consciously, Mary Ellen. But deep in his soul he couldn't bear to have her marry someone else. He knew that he could never have her. And it was the same with you! He broke up our marriage—annulled it before anything could be straightened out—although he was a doctor and was interested in psychiatry. He did not want anyone but himself to have you—or your child either—because you are so much like your mother!"

"I wonder!" she whispered. "I wonder if you are right, darling!"

There was a pause. "Then he would want to keep Christopher, too," she said. She did not sound like Mary Ellen at all.

"Yes, dearest. It is possible."

"What shall I do? I'm so afraid. I've been afraid of him for a long time. And I don't know where to go—where to turn. There's nowhere to hide. And I'm so tired."

MARY ELLEN began to sob, and I know that he held her and comforted her. "You've got to stay here tonight, dearest love," he said. "You mustn't go away. Stay here with me, You can take my room, you and Christopher. I'll sleep in the loft."

"All right," she said softly. "Perhaps you are right. Perhaps that would be best."

I heard them go along the hall, and up

the creaking stairs. Tony was sleeping soundly. I did not have the heart to awaken him. It must have taken me all of three minutes to go back to sleep, myself.

When I awakened again he wasn't there,

It was broad daylight and the windows of the room were wide open. They had been closed during the night as a result of my earnest entreaties. I preferred possible suffocation to other risks.

Now, the fragrance of the narcissus blooming along the path was wafted into the room. I knew this must be a beautiful day.

I felt very fine. It was simply and indescribably wonderful to have had a good night's sleep. And Tony was home! He was out-of-doors already, I supposed.

There was the sound of feet shuffling along the gravel walk beyond the window. I heard Christopher's piping voice, "You are a funny man but I like you!" he said. Then the feet moved on.

I climbed out of bed and dressed with care, doing my hair into a great knot, and putting on my new sweater. It seemed to be that kind of a morning. Then I wandered into the kitchen and discovered at once that it was not. Not that kind of morning at all! The breakfast dishes were stacked in the sink, and Feeba sat in her rocker, silently rocking. Tears ran down her wet face.

She looked up when I came in. "They come and took Mista Eric!" she said.

"Who did?"

"The police!"

Feeba put her apron over her head and began to sob aloud. "I done it!" she wept. "I done it!" I knelt down beside her.

"Now, stop that! Tell me what you did, Feeba? What happened?"

"I done told the police I done lied!"

"What?"

"I done told them on account of Miz Amelia. She stand right here beside me, night and day, and she say, 'Feeba, you lie!' So then when Mista David take me to the police station I tells them."

"What really happened, Feeba?"

"That day Miz Eva killed, she tell me on the telephone to tell Miz Amelia she be down there, four o'clock, waiting—down there where she killed. But Miz Amelia didn't come home. The police, they think Eric listening in on the upstairs phone.



They think he go down push poor Miz Eva in the water!"

"I see."

"I like to die!" said Feeba earnestly.

I put my arm around her tremendous shoulders. "Don't feel that way! Eric didn't do it! You know that! They'll just ask him some questions and send him home."

"They come and get him!" she moaned. "I expect they hang him now!"

"Nonsense!"

She began to rock in a wild abandonment of grief. "Mista David, he go home first thing this morning. Mista Tony he out riding around on Miz Kathie's old horse."

"Tony?"

"Yes'm."

"What a character!" I thought. Aloud I said, "Why didn't you call me!"

"They come take Mista Eric and Miz Mary Ellen! They take her, too!"

"Oh, so they took Mary Ellen! Did they take Christopher?"

"No, ma'am. Miz Mary Ellen, she tell the police little Christopher he ain't here."

"Where is he now?"

"He outside playing, honey."

"Alone!" I thought for a moment. "Who was the man?"

"What man you mean?"

"I heard Christopher talking to a man outside my window this morning," I said. "Who was it?"

Feeba looked at me blankly. Then she shook her head. "There ain't no man around here, honey!"

An icy fear was moving into my heart. I heard the thinness of my own voice.

"Christopher told him that—that he was a 'funny man'!"

She had stopped rocking, and she sat looking at me with her reddened eyes.

"Brockman!" I whispered.

I whirled about and dashed out of doors, calling to Christopher but there was no sign of him anywhere. Then I found the toy duck on the garden walk outside of the bedroom window, among the flowers.

"Christopher!" I cried. "Christopher!"

Feeba came to the window. "Mebbe he gone with Miz Kathie," she said. "Every morning she take a walk."

"Where? Where?"

"I reckon she take him to the graveyard. That where she generally go."

## XXV

I DID NOT CATCH UP with them in the fields.

When I reached the stream they were far ahead of me, beneath the willows. They walked along, hand in hand, the tall woman with the cane, and the tiny tadpole of a little boy.

I wondered if Brockman had gathered narcissus from the path and gone up to the graveyard. I wondered if he knew they would come.

Once I saw Christopher raise his arm and point to a meadow lark, and the sun glinted on his soft golden head as he looked upward.

When I reached the graveyard they were sitting down in the grass by the pool. Brockman was not in sight. I stepped beneath a willow, panting, and stood watching them. They seemed oddly companionable and content.

Miss Kathie had put aside her heavy walking-stick. It lay beside her on the grass. She took from her pocket, now, what appeared to be a large key, and held it in her hand, feeling its smoothness with her fingers.

"It smells here!" said Christopher suddenly. "Look at the green water!" He was taking off his shoes and socks.

"Long ago I used to come here with a little boy like you," mused Miss Kathie. Christopher looked up with interest.

"Where is he?"

"He went away from me. He grew up and went far away from me. And now he has come back."

"I wish I had my duck," said Christopher. "He floats."

He walked down to the pond's edge and dropped a willow leaf into the greenish water. Miss Kathie was playing absently with the key. Presently Christopher came back and stood looking at her with his hands thrust into his pockets.

"What is that?"

"This is a key, little Eric."

"My name is Christopher," he said, with all the dignity of an old man. He stood looking at her respectfully.

"I want that!" he said.

"No, you might lose it. You might lose it in the grass, Eric."

"My name is Christopher."

"I like to call you Eric."

"All right," he said. "Why is the key?"

"It opens the door of the lovely house,"

"Over there?" He pointed to the marble tomb.

"Yes, little Eric."

He looked at her speculatively. "Is it your house?"

"No."

"Who lives inside?"

She hesitated for a moment, and then she said, "A fairy princess lives in there, Eric."

"Oh."

The statement did not interest him. He wandered back to the water's edge and resumed dropping leaves in the pond.

"Wouldn't you like to stay here always, and live near the fairy princess, and the magical water?" she said softly. He came back and considered for a moment.

"No. I like it better with Mary Ellen and my duck, and my dog, Bobby."

"Well, then, they can live here, too. Would you like that?"

Miss Kathie caught his hand and drew him down beside her. "You shall never go away from me anymore!" she said softly. She touched his face lightly with her hand, feeling his features with seeing fingers.

"I want to go home!" said Christopher, firmly. He scrambled to his feet, and she stood up.

**S**UDDENLY I knew that she sensed my presence. I stepped out from behind the willow tree.

"Hello!" I said. She turned slowly to smile her sightless smile in my direction.

"So here you are!" I said gaily, and came forward on trembling legs.

Christopher stood there with his hands in his pockets. "We are going home now," he announced.

"I've been looking all over for you," I said to Miss Kathie. "I've been worried."

"Worried?" said Miss Kathie gently.

"I don't want to alarm you, Miss Kathie—but I—I think Allen Brockman has come back. I wanted to warn you—"

"Little pitchers," said Miss Kathie archly, "have the most remarkably big ears!"

"Don't they!" I murmured.

Christopher began to jump up and down. "Don't they! Don't they! Don't they!" he chanted.

"I heard the little pitcher talking to a man—outside of my window this morning," I said. "I thought it might be Allen Brockman. I thought he might have stopped to gather some narcissus flowers from along the path to bring up here,"

"Perhaps that was it!" she said. "He used to pick them and place them in Lydia's tomb. I thought it strange—this key was in the door."

She showed me the bronze key. "He always keeps it with him," she said.

Christopher was staring at her solemnly.

"She's funny," he said. "She's not really a man, she isn't."

"Of course not!"

"If Allen has been here," said Miss Kathie, "there'll be fresh flowers inside." She thought for a moment. "We might go and see."

We walked slowly towards the tomb.

Christopher came and stood watching with great interest while I fitted the key into the lock. Miss Kathie stood beside me. I was glad that she could not see the trembling of my hand as I turned the key. She stepped quietly behind me as the door swung open.

There was for an instant a breath of chill air and a faint sweetish odor from within.

"Bang!" shouted Christopher. "Bang with the stick!"

I turned and caught her arm as she swung the heavy stick at my head, and I pushed her forward through the opening and slammed the door shut, and locked it.

Christopher stood looking at me delightedly. "What are we playing now?" he inquired.

I picked him up in my arms, without answering, and started to run towards the ranch as fast as I could go.

**T**ONY and I spent that evening alone aboard the *Paquita*. There was the bottle of champagne that I had purchased for his homecoming, but we had not the heart to open it. I did not wear my new ivory satin housecoat. It was not that kind of occasion.

Eric and David had signed the *Paquita* over to us that afternoon. She was all ours again—complete with bullet hole.

But there was too much to forget.

When they had come to get Miss Kathie the search for Dr. Brockman had ended.

They found him there in Lydia's tomb, face downward among the wilting narcissus flowers upon the marble floor,

He had lain there since the previous morning, felled by a blow on the back of the head. According to the autopsy surgeon's report he had probably died early in the evening, never having regained consciousness.

But Miss Kathie had been strangely unmoved. I do not know what I had expected, but I was not prepared for the gentle calmness with which she came forth from her gruesome prison.

I recall thinking that it must have been terrifyingly dark in there, and then remembering suddenly that darkness was everywhere in her world.

They had brought her back to the ranch, and she had sat in Feeba's rocking chair in the kitchen, and would answer no questions until Eric arrived. When, finally, he came into the room with Mary Ellen the blind woman turned her face towards him and smiled that strange, incomplete smile of hers.

"Eric," she said gently, "they say that I have killed Allen."

No matter what she had done, I was glad that she could not see the expression on his face. "Well, did you?"

"No," she said.

"Did you kill Amelia and Eva Singleton?"

"No."

There was a pause. "I think that you did!" he said.

Mary Ellen never took her eyes from his. I knew what she was so terribly afraid of seeing there. But she need not have been apprehensive. His face was strong and composed.

"You went to meet Eva, didn't you?"

"Yes, Eric," said Kathie. "I listened on the telephone. I always do. One must hear everything if one cannot see. And when Amelia did not come home, I rode Claude down to the headlands. Eva saw me there and came to meet me. She led Claude down the bridle trail so that we could tether him. I tied him to a piling and Eva talked."

Her face was quiet and thoughtful. "She knew that you were at the ranch, Eric, and she wanted a great deal of money. I knew that she would drive you away, that you

would leave me again and hide from her. And so it seemed such simpler to strike her with my cane, and she fell into the water."

There was a pause. "But you did not kill her?" Tony asked.

She turned her face towards him. "No. She had been dead for years. Her soul was dead." She sighed.

"Afterwards, I stood there. Waiting for people to come. For shouts and running feet. But nothing happened, nobody saw me, and so I mounted Claude again and rode home." It had been four o'clock in the afternoon, and nobody had been about.

Then, four days later, just before dawn she had listened to another telephone conversation. Again she had ridden her horse down to the headlands. But fishermen were about at that hour of day. People saw her—

"I thought last night that it was Eric Conway," Tony confessed to me, "Because I began to think about the horse—that he could have ridden the horse down to the boulevard, and thumbed a ride to Vinson's house from there, early in the morning."

Tony had ridden Miss Kathie's horse down to the headlands at the same hour of morning, letting him go his own way. Given his head, Claude had jogged along just as he had been trained to do. Claude had stopped in the fields, on the other side of the boulevard and begun to graze.

"I knew that if Conway had ridden down to the boulevard early yesterday," Tony said, "someone would surely have seen him. And I had decided to question everyone who passed that way until I found someone who had passed there yesterday. It was simpler than I had anticipated. Two purse-seiners came along within a short time, laden down with their equipment. They told me that they had seen someone on horseback—not a man, but a woman—a blind woman who was a familiar figure to them (for she rode down to the headlands often in the early mornings)."

**B**UT this time Miss Kathie had not turned her horse and ridden back. She had dismounted in the field, they said, and had sent the horse home. Then she had walked along the path to the boulevard. There she had stood at the curb, waving her heavy white cane, and had gotten a lift almost immediately.

She had gotten a lift to David's door, and she had gone along the familiar path towards the summer-house. Amelia walked to meet her.

"Sometime during their conversation," Tony said, "Amelia told her that she suspected Eric, and that for everyone's sake she would never permit his child or his wife to live at the ranch." And Kathie had known again the agonizing panic of losing him. She had struck Amelia a blow with her cane, and had pushed her from the summer-house.

"I should have suspected her," Tony said, "but, somehow, I never did. I should have noticed Kathie's cane—that it is an unusually heavy one designed as a protection as well as a guide. And I should have noted that Eva Singleton's death, and Amelia's also, were not caused primarily by the blow. A man—with sight—could have dealt a heavier blow, with a heavier implement of his own choosing. But Kathie had only her cane. And the ultimate cause of death in Eva Singleton's case was drowning—and Amelia, stunned also, was killed by her fall."

He thought for a while.

"Then, too," he said, "I might have suspected that the murderer was blind. Anyone with sight would have removed the shoe from the boardwalk. Without that, you might never have found the body—and the chances are that it would have floated out to sea. And by the same token Amelia's body could have been buried at some time during the day, in the loose soil of the hillside—by someone with normal eyesight."

For no one had witnessed the crime except Christopher who had been watching, enchanted, from the window.

Disheveled and exhausted, Kathie had met Allen Brockman when he left the house. She had told him that she had gotten a lift from the boulevard as far as David's house. She told him that she had fallen from her horse, and pleaded with him not to mention the fact to the family. He took her back to the ranch, and sealed his own doom—not because he was the only one who had seen her at the place of the murder, but because he told her that he intended to take Eric's child.

"It never occurred to her to cover her

tracks," Tony said to me in awe. "In her dark world she did not see herself as a murderer. She wanted to keep Eric—and then Eric's child—and people got in her way, and somehow, murders happened."

After Brockman had had his talk with Eric, Miss Kathie had helped him pick flowers for Lydia's tomb, and together they had walked to the graveyard. But Miss Kathie had come back alone.

It was, after all, she who had told the child, Eric, about the magical water that made people vanish—and she had told him at a time when Lydia walked in the garden with his father, planning to take Eric away and place Kathie in a home for the blind.

"Tony," I said, "Tony, what will they do with her now?"

"I don't know." He rubbed his chin. "But don't worry about her. There's a black magic department that takes care of Miss Kathie."

"It isn't as though she were just plain wicked—" I said.

"No, there's nothing plain about her wickedness, beautiful. It is quite ornate. But don't worry about her!"

AND Tony was right. They never had to do anything about Miss Kathie because, quietly and for no apparent reason, she died that week. She died on the very day that Eric and Mary Ellen were remarried.

But to get back to that evening aboard the *Paquita*, "Let's not think about it anymore!" I said. "Let's think about something else!"

"All right," said Tony, "let's think about Bermuda!"

"Bermuda?"

"I told you—don't you remember—when we stood on the palisades that day watching the *Paquita* sail away—that sometime we would go to Bermuda."

"Yes, I remember."

"As soon as I get out of the Army that is where we'll go! We will go down to the sea again, beautiful! I would be willing to drink to that!"

So we opened up the champagne and drank to Tony getting out of the Army. Then we drank to the *Paquita*.

After that we felt much better.

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## **TWO FACED MURDER**

**By JEAN LESLIE**

What was wrong? They were all lovely people in this college town, and Professor Peter Ponsonby and his luscious fiancée, Mara Mallory, were glad to be visiting them: even Candy Too, Peter's four-year-old niece, was having a good time. But the grim cancer of a secret worry was eating at their hosts, Ken and Allie Grayson. And pleasant Georgianna Fawcett. And debonair James York, the poet. And Peggy Ann Larsen, she of the war-smashed husband. And Mark Cready, the Restoration man. And Amos Schroeder, the despised police chief. For Clive Titus' wife, Jane, had disappeared and until she was found each had private reason for terror. They all turned anxious eyes on Peter Ponsonby, writer of detective stories and therefore skilled at solving human puzzles. Peter sighed and went out with Mara to find Jane. It wasn't hard. Poor Jane was forever done with running and hiding. Then Peter started grimly along an old and terrible trail, and the murderer it was who had to run and hide. Until Peter finally treed his vicious quarry. Then the killer whirled and struck—again and again!

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*and*

## **THE WITCHES' POOL**

**By SUSAN WELLS**

The *Paquita* was really a dreamboat. Tony and Echo Ware's hearts had broken when the war forced them to sell the little trim, white yawl. Then the fighting stopped and lovely, wistful Echo came back first—to a bullet-hole in the bulkhead, a beautiful intruder writing strange messages in the dead of night, an elderly female corpse floating in the water and the carefully-laid-out skeleton of a cat. Threading all these things together was the mystery of who had written "The Witches' Pool," a psychological thriller—and obviously true! But the worst of all was the inexorable tightening of the coils of guilt about Echo herself. Had she not been heard threatening the drowned woman? Echo fled—fled from the diabolical cleverness of a twisted mind—fled to a place by a quiet pool. Yet poison and evil lay thick in the very air above its polluted waters . . . for she had come to the Witches' Pool itself. And brutal death lay waiting for her there, treading softly over the lush, wild flowers. . . .

*Soon to be Published in Book Form*



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